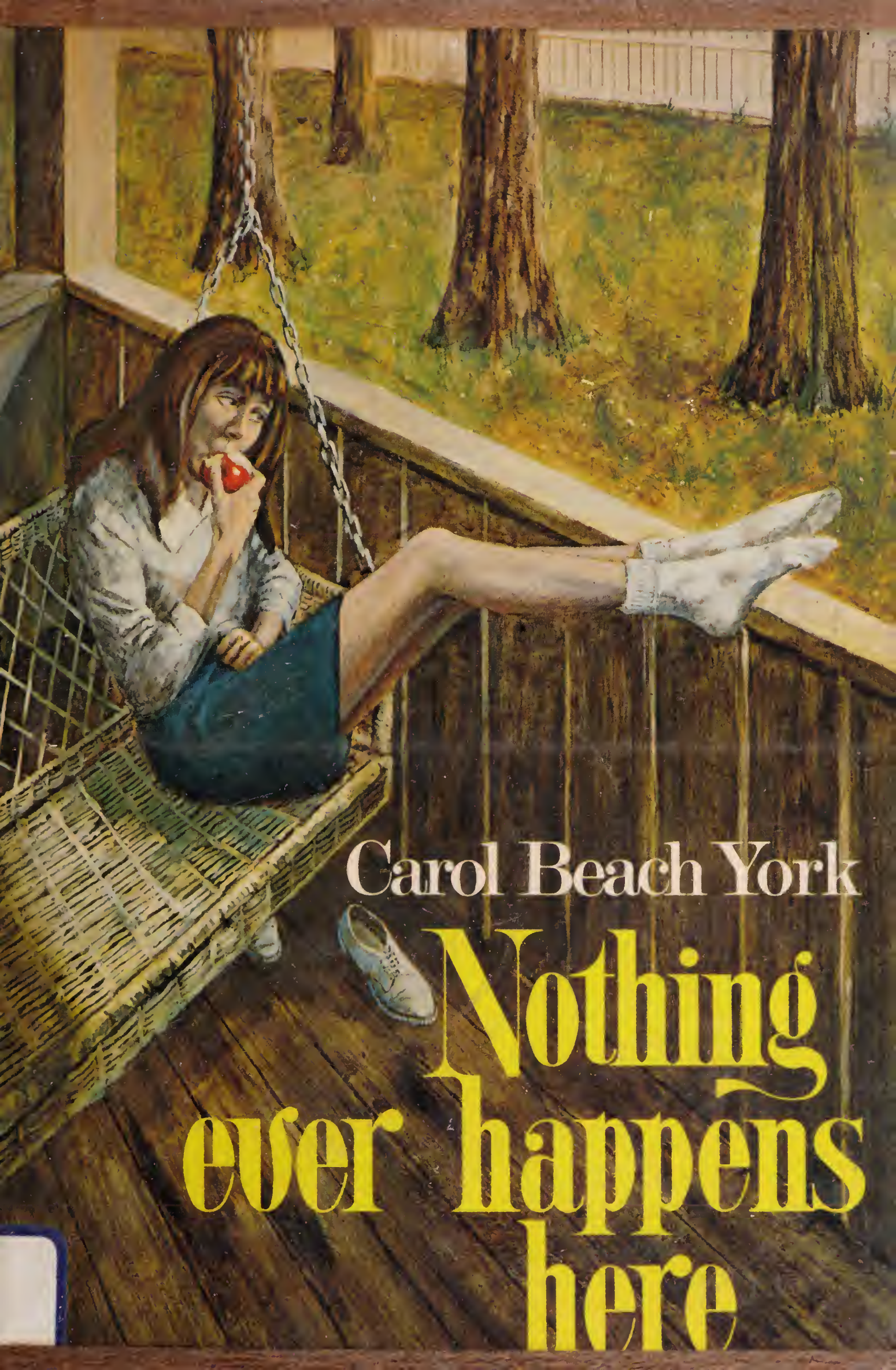


Carol Beach York

Nothing ever happens here

$5.95

Nothing Ever Happens Here

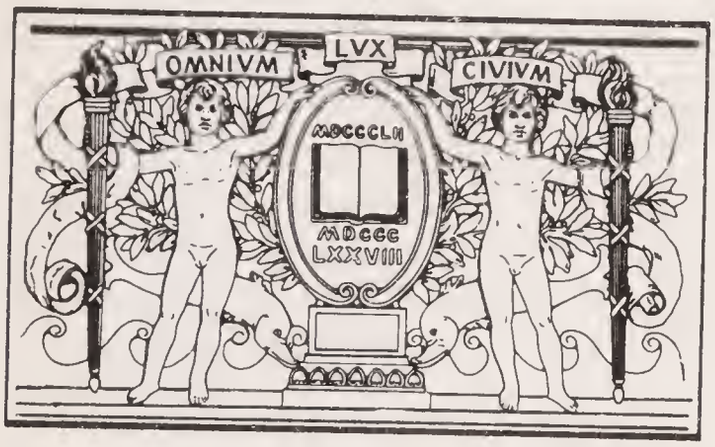
By CAROL BEACH YORK

"Nothing ever happens here" is Elizabeth's constant complaint about the small town where she lives with her aunt and her widowed father. School has only just ended, and she is already bored with the long summer vacation days and eager to escape the sleepy town and the tedium of the lives around her.

When her aunt rents an apartment in their house to Ruby and Barney Hollis, a couple in their mid-thirties, Elizabeth accepts the couple's friendship out of boredom, but she slowly comes to appreciate the special quality of their happy marriage and to understand this quiet love as part of a real life more complex than she has reckoned on, more beautiful than her romantic dreams. With this wondering discovery comes the disturbing thought that perhaps she has underestimated her father and her aunt, that under their placid façades they, too, may be dreamers.

Throughout the book, peripheral criminal connections are a menace to the Hollises. This element of tension provides a strong dramatic framework

(continued on back flap)



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NOTHING EVER HAPPENS HERE

by

Carol Beach York

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For my dear friend Laurene

Nothing Ever Happens Here

CHAPTER ONE

Piermont Street has always been the same. Cottonwood poplars drop their red "worms" in the spring, and elm trees arching over the road seem to bud and open their leaves almost overnight. In our yard the lilac bushes are in bloom by early May, and Aunt Lou's parrot tulips are tall and bright, with ragged edges to their petals and fluffy purple pollen that comes off like thick black dust on your fingers if you touch it.

Our house is set far back from the street, deep in a patch of spirea bushes, a rambling old frame house with a wide front porch where you can't sit much at night because the mosquitoes get so bad after dusk. But Aunt Lou always says nothing can take the place of a good old-fashioned porch.

Well, of course, from our front porch you do have a lovely view: all that dull, dusty, quiet old street—even a few barefoot children running by now and then—or for real excitement the mailman might come along or one of Aunt Lou's lady friends.

I always sat in the same place: on the end of the swing, twisting so that my feet rested on the porch rail.

"It makes my back ache to see you sit like that," Aunt Lou had said for years and years. When I got older she changed and said, "You're too old to sit like that, Elizabeth—it's not ladylike."

So it was a game just to see how long she'd wait before she made her speech. Sometimes she would try ignoring me, but usually she gave in at last, and getting up to go in and start supper she would say, "Get your feet down from that railing, Elizabeth," and let the screen door close behind her disdainfully.

At the back of our house, upstairs, was a two-room apartment which we rented out furnished. Even when the more modern six-apartment buildings on the other end of town had "For Rent" signs on their front lawns, our apartment never stayed vacant long. Aunt Lou said that was because our apartment was so nice for young couples just starting out. It was small and easy to keep clean, and full of furniture. It was handy to stores and the bus station. (Although the stores weren't much in my opinion, and anybody going to the bus station ought to get on a bus and never come back anyway.) Aunt Lou seemed to think that the stores and the bus station added a lot to the apartment, and she always mentioned them when she was showing the rooms to people.

I always thought what*ever* it was handy to, *I* wasn't going to start out anyplace like that when I got married. Maybe I couldn't help being born in Green Falls, but I sure wasn't going to start anything there. I was going to live in a fancy apartment in a big city, probably New York or San Francisco; and I was going to wear a lot of peach-colored silk dresses and gold jewelry.

Because the apartment was never a problem to rent, Aunt Lou didn't mind when Mr. and Mrs. Anderson left, except that she said she would miss them. They were a nice young couple, and I was personally glad to see them moving on to better things. (I was sure wherever they went it would be better.) I was busy with end-of-the-year tests at school and writing a history paper on Egypt. Lost in my 2,500 words about the pyramids and the riches of the tombs, I was vaguely aware that the Andersons were moving out their clothes and their TV set. Aunt Lou gave the apartment a good cleaning, which she always did no matter how clean the last tenants had left it. Then she put an ad in the *Green Falls Tribune*, and had the apartment rented again before the first week of summer vacation was over.

I wasn't home the afternoon she rented it, but when I came in at suppertime Aunt Lou met me quite cheerfully, considering I was too late to set the table and peel the potatoes, which I was supposed to do. "I've rented the apartment," she said. It was warm in the kitchen, and tendrils of her grayish hair had escaped the ribbon she had tied them back with and brushed across her forehead. She bustled ahead and got everything ready without bothering me about slicing the bread or pouring the milk. She always thought up jobs like that for me when her mind wasn't occupied with something else more important. This evening it was.

"A man and his wife. Such a nice couple. Mr. and Mrs. Hollis. They were here this afternoon to look at it."

"That's nice," I said. But I was really thinking about the new dress my girl friend Kitty-ellen French had

bought, and wishing I could persuade Aunt Lou and my father that I needed a new dress too.

"They aren't here now," Aunt Lou went on. She assumed I was breathless with interest to hear about Mr. and Mrs. Hollis. "They're new in these parts, and they've been staying temporarily at that motel out on Bridge Road. They were paid up there through the week, till tomorrow. Mr. Hollis travels in his work—call your father, Elizabeth—but Mrs. Hollis is coming tomorrow to move in."

I went to the foot of the stairway and called, "Supper's ready."

"I can scream myself," Aunt Lou said, appearing behind me in the dining room with a bowl of salad and a butter dish. She put these on the table and stood watching until I started up the stairs, sighing dramatically so she could see how much this effort was taxing my energy. Upstairs I knocked at my father's door and said, "Supper's ready." Across the hall were my bedroom and a bathroom. Old hardwood floors dark with varnish showed at the edges of a strip of faded blue carpeting not wide enough for the hall. The hall was papered with a print of blue cornflowers that matched nothing else in the house, least of all the shade of blue in the carpet on the floor.

My father opened his door and came out, rolling down his shirt sleeves, and I could see through the doorway that he had been sitting at his table by the window putting stamps in his albums. I couldn't think of anything more dreary to do on a summer afternoon. Even

sitting around Kitty-ellen's house wondering what to do was better than that!

"So we've rented the apartment," my father remarked when the three of us settled at the table and Aunt Lou had said grace.

I wished just once we could talk about something exciting.

The next afternoon when Mrs. Hollis came to move in, I was sitting on the porch swing eating an apple and watching Piermont Street drooping in the heat. Aunt Lou sat in the wicker rocking chair sewing. Some boys rode by on bicycles and a faint haze of dust hung in their wake and slowly dissipated into the air at last. Then the taxi came, stopping in front of our house, and the woman got out.

"Here's Mrs. Hollis," Aunt Lou said. She stood up and went to the edge of the porch steps. "Get your feet down off that railing," she said to me, under her breath so Mrs. Hollis wouldn't hear. Mrs. Hollis had paid the cab driver and apparently said she could manage herself, for the cab drove off and she came up our walk carrying two medium-sized suitcases and a big straw purse.

I threw my apple core across the side yard for the robins to eat, and put my feet down from the railing.

"Hello there," Mrs. Hollis said cheerfully. She set the suitcases down by the porch steps.

"Hello, Mrs. Hollis," Aunt Lou said. "I was kind of looking for you."

"Oh, were you? That's nice." Mrs. Hollis sounded

pleased to think that someone had been looking for her. She stood smiling up at us awkwardly, squinting in the sunlight and waiting for Aunt Lou to make the next move. Her hair was a reddish color, and she had fair skin with large pale freckles on her face and arms.

"We'll help you get those suitcases upstairs," Aunt Lou said. "Elizabeth, take one of those suitcases for Mrs. Hollis."

I went down the steps.

"Thank you very much," Mrs. Hollis said. She took one of the suitcases and I took the other, and Aunt Lou came down the steps and led the way around the side of the house to the stairway near the back which was the private entrance of the apartment.

We walked along single file on the narrow cobblestone walk, and twice Mrs. Hollis stumbled. I guess she wasn't used to walking on such crumbling old walks in high-heeled shoes. The stones had settled unevenly over the years (over the centuries, I liked to think to myself); some of the stones had separated and grass was growing between them. I was last in line, and Mrs. Hollis looked back at me apologetically when she stumbled. I couldn't help noticing how old her shoes were. There was a place on the strap of one of the shoes that looked as if it had broken once and been sewed back together. I bet she's had those shoes a long time, I thought—and I felt only moderately guilty, even though Aunt Lou said it was wicked to criticize people's clothes.

But I couldn't help looking at Mrs. Hollis' shoes because she stumbled. Then I saw her stockings. There was a narrow run just starting up the back of one at the

heel. Her dress was cotton and very plain, and then I noticed what a thin, long neck she had. She wore her hair cut very short in the back, and her dress had a scooped neckline, so her neck seemed to stretch out between her hair and the collar of her dress longer than any neck I had ever seen.

Aunt Lou started up the stairs, holding the wooden handrail, and Mrs. Hollis and I followed with the suitcases. I thought about the apartment I was going to live in when I was grown up and married, and the silk dresses and gold jewelry and fancy shoes I was going to have. And how beautiful I was going to be.

"I came in this morning and raised the windows for you, so it wouldn't be too stuffy when you came," Aunt Lou said. She had unlocked the apartment door and went marching in. "It gets hot up here in the summer, that's the only drawback."

"Oh, I don't mind the heat much," Mrs. Hollis said politely.

Aunt Lou made motions of fanning herself with her hand. "The heat bothers me. You get as old as I am, Mrs. Hollis, you'll see."

Mrs. Hollis looked sympathetic, and I think she was going to say something about how Aunt Lou didn't look so old, but Aunt Lou had crossed the room and opened the door to the kitchen. "You get more air in here with this door open," she said. "And there's this fan. It goes with the apartment."

Aunt Lou went over and plugged in a small fan set on the floor under the windows. It had a metal grille over the blades, and oscillated slowly when it was going. She

fiddled with it a moment, to get it aimed up at us at just the right angle, and Mrs. Hollis' dress stood out around her knees like a hoop skirt.

"That feels very nice," Mrs. Hollis said.

Aunt Lou fiddled some more, and straightened up at last, red-faced and short of breath. "There," she said, "that helps some."

I set the suitcase down and lounged against the doorway, partly out of lack of ambition to go anywhere else, and partly out of amused interest to see how Aunt Lou would explain everything about the apartment to Mrs. Hollis, as if when she had left Mrs. Hollis could not find out everything for herself anyway.

But of course Mrs. Hollis had been there the day before, and there wasn't much left to explain now. The living room was furnished with a sofa bed and armchair, a bookcase, two small tables and lamps, and a second-hand phonograph left behind by one of the former tenants. In the kitchen there were a table and three chairs, and in the cupboards a variety of pans and inexpensive dishes and silverware. Aunt Lou and Mrs. Hollis conferred briefly by the doorway to the bathroom, where everything seemed to be in satisfactory order. Then Aunt Lou showed Mrs. Hollis how to handle the window latch in the kitchen, which needed fixing, and Mrs. Hollis stood there at the window a moment looking down at the side yard and the house next door.

"This is such a nice town," she said as she finally turned away from the window and came into the living room.

I guess I made a face at the wrong time, and Aunt Lou said shortly, "Lady Elizabeth doesn't think so."

"Oh, don't you?" Mrs. Hollis looked at me uncertainly.

I shrugged. "Nothing ever happens here."

Mrs. Hollis looked at me a moment, and then she said, "Oh, go on. A pretty girl like you, you must go to lots of parties and things. I bet more happens than you think."

Aunt Lou looked at Mrs. Hollis with a definite expression of approval.

"Nothing exciting ever happens," I answered, and Aunt Lou shook her head wearily.

"If six banks aren't robbed by noon, Elizabeth thinks the day is lost."

"We don't even have six banks," I said. In New York or San Francisco, where I was going to live, exciting things happened all the time. Aunt Lou and Mrs. Hollis just didn't understand.

"Well, I think it's a very pretty town," Mrs. Hollis said. "And I certainly think this is a very pretty apartment. Everything is so fresh and clean."

Aunt Lou lapped up the praise. "Why don't you come downstairs and have some cold lemonade when you've got your things unpacked?" she said.

Mrs. Hollis looked pleased. "That would be very nice," she said. She smiled at Aunt Lou. Her face was thin and it made her teeth look too large. I didn't think she was pretty at all. I thought it would be terrible not to be pretty, at least a little, anyway, and I felt sad looking at Mrs. Hollis.

"Well, you come down then," Aunt Lou said. She opened the door and started out. "Anytime'll be all right."

I followed Aunt Lou down the stairs, and Mrs. Hollis stood inside the screen door and watched us as we went down and around the side of the house.

She joined us almost right away. Either she was lonesome for someone to talk to, or she didn't have very many clothes to unpack. Aunt Lou had just made the lemonade and carried it out to the porch when Mrs. Hollis came walking around the side of the house. She stood at the foot of the steps waiting until Aunt Lou looked up.

"Come right on up, Mrs. Hollis," Aunt Lou said. "Elizabeth, move over so Mrs. Hollis can sit down. Unless"—she turned to Mrs. Hollis—"you'd rather have one of these chairs."

"I'll sit here," Mrs. Hollis said, choosing an old green wicker chair next to the swing. She smiled at me. "I always think it's hard to sit on a swing with someone—I mean, you never know how much they want it to move. I had an uncle once who got dizzy if he sat on a porch swing with anyone and they pushed with their feet."

"He did?" I thought that sounded interesting.

"Yes; yes, he did," Mrs. Hollis said solemnly.

Aunt Lou had put the lemonade tray on a table between the swing and the wicker chairs, and she filled the glasses and handed them around to us.

"We have to have cookies, too," she explained to Mrs. Hollis. "If Elizabeth doesn't have something to eat every

half hour or so, she languishes away dreadfully." She opened the cookie canister and passed it to Mrs. Hollis.

I took two cookies when they came to me, just to show I was unimpressed by her humor.

Mrs. Hollis said, "Just wait. Next year Elizabeth probably won't eat anything. I didn't when I was—oh, about fifteen."

"You didn't?" I watched her curiously. She was holding the lemonade in one hand and a cookie in the other, and somehow she looked awkward doing it, as though it were going to matter in some way whether she took a sip of the lemonade first or a bite of the cookie.

"No, I didn't eat anything," she said. "I was on a diet. I thought I would get thin and beautiful and go to Hollywood and be in the movies."

She said this so solemnly and Aunt Lou and I stared at her so blankly, that she laughed. "Oh, I know what you're thinking. You're wondering how I ever thought I was going to get beautiful enough to be in the movies. Well, I didn't. I got thin, and my mother got awful mad at me for not eating—but, here I am." She laughed again good-naturedly. "I never did get to Hollywood."

"Well, we'll save a lot on the grocery bills when Elizabeth starts to diet," Aunt Lou said. She looked at me speculatively over the rim of her lemonade glass. Her sewing lay beside her in the chair; all my life Aunt Lou had been sewing on something when she sat down to rest her feet. She made aprons for everyone she knew at Christmas, and she made pretty things for me to wear. After she'd had a few sips of lemonade she would set her

glass down and reach for the sewing again, sitting back in her chair contentedly.

"What have you had just since lunch, Elizabeth? Let me see—an apple, I remember that." Aunt Lou pursed up her mouth and thought hard. "And you had some salted peanuts in the kitchen while I was making the lemonade."

I hated being stared at and talked about, as though everything I ate were clearly visible inside my stomach if anyone wanted to check. I looked down into my lemonade glass and pretended not to hear. Maybe, just to show everybody, I would start tomorrow not eating *anything*, like Mrs. Hollis had done. Just think how frantic Aunt Lou would be *then*.

"Why, here comes Willa," Aunt Lou said, forgetting about what was in my stomach in favor of who was coming up our walk.

"Mrs. Hollis, this is Willa Banister, one of my friends," Aunt Lou said. Mrs. Banister came up the steps. Her car was parked at the curb in front of our house by the elm tree, so it wouldn't be in the sun. It looked as if it had just been washed. "Willa," Aunt Lou went on, "this is Mrs. Hollis, our new tenant."

"Is that so?" Mrs. Banister said. "How nice to meet you, Mrs. Hollis."

"It's very nice to meet *you*," Mrs. Hollis said. She sat forward in her chair and smiled with her large teeth in her thin face. Mrs. Banister sat down on the swing beside me, holding it quite firmly still with her feet planted on the porch floor. "I'll sit here with you, Elizabeth," she said sweetly, "if you don't jiggle me."

Mrs. Banister's daughter Amy was in my class at school, and it was always fun when we were at Amy's house to hear Mrs. Banister talk about Green Falls. Mrs. Banister hated every stone in every street and every $2.98 house dress in Kimball's window; she hated what she called "small town things," like the park dances and the Fourth of July parade in Bakersville (for which Green Falls was all but evacuated); and old frame houses like ours with porches (she had one too). She liked to say she was born for other things, to which Aunt Lou would reply, just to get back, "Weren't we all?" But of course Aunt Lou really loved every stone in every street, and the old houses, and the park dances, and the Fourth of July parades—and she probably would have liked a house dress from Kimball's, except they didn't carry her size for $2.98. Somehow their friendship survived this chasm of opinions, and it was always vaguely understood that someday, somehow, Mrs. Banister would "escape"—as she put it.

"If I ever thought Amy would get old enough to marry and then marry some Green Falls boy and settle down here . . ." Mrs. Banister would say, but the sentence was always too awful to finish, and she would close her eyes to shut out the ghastly picture her own words conjured up.

Not that Mrs. Banister was sitting idly by. Amy Banister was studying dancing, and one day, Mrs. Banister fondly dreamed, Amy would put on her toe shoes and dance away from Green Falls forever. Of all the girls at school who wanted to grow up and go away someplace

exciting to live, Amy Banister seemed to have the best start so far.

Once when I had been angry at Amy about something for three days, I had imagined her grown up and married and living in Green Falls in our little apartment. I came to visit her from New York, and let her try on my fur coats.

"Mrs. Hollis is from Pennsylvania," Aunt Lou said to Mrs. Banister.

"So you're going to come here and live in Green Falls?" Mrs. Banister said to Mrs. Hollis. Mrs. Banister was too polite to show what a revolting prospect she thought this was.

"Yes, it's such a pretty little town," Mrs. Hollis said. "And I don't mind if it's peaceful. I don't mind that at all." She sent a quick little smile toward me.

"Well, it's peaceful all right," Mrs. Banister said a trifle grimly.

"Now, now, Willa," Aunt Lou chided. Mrs. Banister smiled cunningly.

"Don't you want some lemonade?" Aunt Lou asked.

"No, thank you. I just had some iced tea at home." Mrs. Banister smoothed her skirt and a row of colored bracelets she wore clicked together when she moved her arm.

"Where's Amy?" I asked.

"Amy is having a make-up dancing lesson," Mrs. Banister said. She looked at her watch. "I'm on my way to pick her up now, in just a few minutes."

"Does your daughter take dancing, Mrs. Banister?"

Mrs. Hollis said. "Oh, that's so nice. That's a wonderful opportunity for a girl."

Mrs. Banister glowed under the tone of admiration and awe in Mrs. Hollis' voice. "Yes, well, Amy enjoys it very much," she said modestly.

"I'm sure she does," Mrs. Hollis said. "And I bet she's a beautiful dancer too, isn't she."

"She dances very nicely," Aunt Lou said when Mrs. Banister seemed too modest to answer this for herself.

There was a seed in my lemonade and I spit it out in my hand and threw it across the lawn. Aunt Lou sighed, just enough to let me know she wished I'd be more ladylike when she had company, and not enough to distract Mrs. Banister and Mrs. Hollis from their talk.

"Lou never seems to have any trouble renting that apartment when it's vacant," Mrs. Banister said.

"It's nice for young couples starting out—" Aunt Lou started into her repertoire of reasons why the apartment was easy to rent, but then she stopped and Mrs. Hollis laughed. "Well, we're not exactly a young couple starting out, are we?" Mrs. Hollis said. "But we do like the apartment."

Aunt Lou said, "I just meant, after they've been married a while and a few babies come along, that apartment's too small. By then young couples have got some money saved and want to buy their own furniture. So they move on to a larger place, sometimes even buy their own house. They can save money for their house, living in a little apartment like ours."

Aunt Lou had begun sewing again as she talked, and I

pushed against the porch floor with my feet to see if Mrs. Banister would notice. I wondered if I could make her dizzy like Mrs. Hollis' uncle.

Mrs. Hollis nodded her head as Aunt Lou talked. "You're right," she said. "I can certainly see why you don't have trouble renting a nice apartment like that. But of course, I won't have to worry about having any babies coming along—not after all this time, I guess."

"You don't have any children?" Mrs. Banister said.

"No." Mrs. Hollis hesitated a moment. "I always thought I'd like children—a little girl maybe—but it just never worked out like that."

Everyone was quiet, and then Mrs. Banister cleared her throat and said briskly, "What does your husband do, Mrs. Hollis?"

I let their talk flow around me without particularly listening, yet not thinking about anything else special either. Far down the street I could see some boys walking along, and I squinted my eyes and tried to see if any boy I liked was there. But they turned at the corner and went down Sycamore Street, so I couldn't tell. I thought about getting my bike out and going over to Kitty-ellen's, except I had been there all day yesterday and her mother had said—rather pointedly, I thought—that Kitty-ellen had to clean her room and iron some of her clothes that were collecting in a basket in the basement.

". . . housewares displays. It's something new for my husband," Mrs. Hollis was saying. "This is only his third week, actually, but he doesn't mind traveling. He seems to like it just fine so far."

"It sounds interesting," Mrs. Banister said vaguely.

"Yes, I think so too," Mrs. Hollis agreed eagerly. "You see, he goes to a different territory every week—that's what they call them, territories. You know, all the towns in a certain area, that's a territory."

Mrs. Banister nodded. She looked a little bored, and when Mrs. Hollis turned toward Aunt Lou, Mrs. Banister looked at her watch.

"He goes to the store owners and shows them the different specials for the month. Oh, it's very interesting."

It sounded awful to me. I watched Mrs. Hollis curiously again. She had been married long enough to stop expecting babies, and yet here was her husband just starting in a new job. All the men I knew that were that old had had their jobs all their lives.

"I've met Mr. Hollis," Aunt Lou said to Amy's mother. "He's such a nice man."

Mrs. Hollis looked delighted. "Did you think so, Mrs. Carrington?"

"It's *Miss* Carrington," Aunt Lou corrected her. "I never married. Good thing I never did, I guess. Now I keep house for my brother—he's a widower."

"Oh." Mrs. Hollis looked sympathetic and understanding.

"Anyway," Aunt Lou continued, not even looking up from her sewing, "Mr. Hollis is a real nice man. Good-looking man, too." This time she looked up at Mrs. Hollis and smiled.

"Do you think so?" Mrs. Hollis said. She looked as happy as a child. She turned to Mrs. Banister and me and said, "Wait until you see Barney. He's so good-looking you'll wonder how he ever married a girl like me."

Mrs. Banister murmured something about thinking Mrs. Hollis was very pretty and shouldn't talk like that.

Mrs. Hollis shook her head and said, "Everyone always wonders how a man as good-looking as Barney ever married a girl like me."

"Maybe he fell in love with you," Aunt Lou said.

Mrs. Hollis blushed and said, "Well—I guess it must have been something like that. He sure didn't marry me just because of what a beauty I am."

"Where did you say you lived before . . . before you came here?" Mrs. Banister asked. I suddenly had the feeling that she was beginning to wonder about two people coming out of nowhere to rent Aunt Lou's apartment—a man just starting a new job. People were born in Green Falls; nobody ever just *came* there.

"We lived in Pennsylvania, near Scranton." Mrs. Hollis seemed to hesitate. She put down her empty glass and avoided looking directly at anyone. I noticed that she had taken off her stockings and changed from the high-heeled shoes to a pair of flat straw sandals. Her legs were pretty, and the sandals were brand new. I was glad the old pumps weren't the only shoes she had to wear.

"What line of work was your husband in there?" Mrs. Banister said. Aunt Lou went on sewing. You couldn't tell for sure if she was even listening, but I knew she was.

"Well, he was a car salesman," Mrs. Hollis said.

Mrs. Banister smiled and nodded encouragingly, but Mrs. Hollis did not say anything more, and even Mrs. Banister did not quite have the nerve to ask any more questions, though I was wishing she would at least ask

why Mr. Hollis had quit selling cars. But I think Mrs. Hollis could tell we were all wondering why her husband stopped selling cars, came hundreds of miles to a no-place town like Green Falls, and started selling housewares displays to grocery stores.

She stood up and said, "I guess I'd better get back to my unpacking. It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Banister."

"It was nice to meet you," Mrs. Banister said. She looked at her watch. "And I guess it's nearly time for me to get Amy."

But after Mrs. Hollis had thanked Aunt Lou for the lemonade and gone around the side of the house and up to her apartment, Mrs. Banister lingered. Aunt Lou went on with her sewing, and at last Mrs. Banister said, "Well, she seems like a real nice young woman, doesn't she?"

"Yes, she does," Aunt Lou answered, without looking up.

Mrs. Banister waited, but Aunt Lou did not say anything more. I could tell Mrs. Banister wanted to talk about Mr. and Mrs. Hollis, and at last she said, "Too bad she never had any children. She'd have been a real sweet mother."

"Why didn't she adopt a baby if she wanted one so bad?" I said.

Aunt Lou looked up at me sharply. "Babies aren't as easy as all that to adopt."

"No, indeed they're not," Mrs. Banister said, as though *any*body might have known that. Then she said to Aunt Lou, "By the way, how old do you suppose she is?"

Aunt Lou said, "Oh, thirty."

"Nearer thirty-five, if you ask me," Mrs. Banister said. "How old is her husband?"

"Older than she is," Aunt Lou said. "In his early forties maybe."

Mrs. Banister thought about this a minute. Then she said, "What do you make of them, Lou?"

"I think they're very nice," Aunt Lou said. I could tell she wasn't going to say anything more, at least not in front of me. Mrs. Banister got up reluctantly and stretched her arms out in front of her, hands clasped together, bracelets clinking faintly. She was a small, slender woman with dark hair carefully touched up so that no gray showed. She always looked rather elegant—at least elegant for Green Falls, where all the other mothers of my friends tended to blend vaguely together as so many faces at kitchen doorways, bakers of angel cakes, and chauffeurs of cars on rainy school days.

"Well, back to the salt mines," Mrs. Banister said at last, which meant she had to pick up Amy from her dancing lesson and get back home to start supper for Mr. Banister.

The next day Mrs. Hollis went shopping, and came back with a big bag of things. She came downstairs and rapped at the kitchen door once during the afternoon and asked Aunt Lou if music bothered her.

"I got some records to play on that phonograph that's up there," she said.

"No, it doesn't bother us at all," Aunt Lou said. "We can't even hear it much down here."

But I could hear the records at night when Mrs. Hollis played them. Not because she played them loud; she didn't. But because the windows were open on those warm nights, and my bedroom was next to the apartment. They were pretty records, slow, dreamy dance music, and one of them she played more than any of the others. I asked her what the name of it was later, and she said it was "The Blue Tango," explaining, "it's an old song, way before your time, Elizabeth. But it sure is pretty, isn't it." Sometimes it was the only one she played, putting the needle back and starting it over and over.

"Seems like she could use some other things with her money besides records," Aunt Lou said, but I liked to hear them.

At last, four or five days later, Mrs. Hollis' husband came back from showing his housewares displays to the grocery stores. I was just coming downstairs to go to Kitty-ellen's when I heard the car drive up in front. I stood in the front hall and looked out through the screen. I knew it was Mr. Hollis, because he had a suitcase that matched the ones Mrs. Hollis had brought. Aunt Lou was in the yard cutting some flowers for the house, and she came across the grass to speak to him. They stood together talking a few minutes, and I was very disappointed. Mr. Hollis might have been good-looking once, but his hair was beginning to get gray at the sides and his suit was kind of old and unpressed-looking. He certainly wasn't my idea of a man so handsome everyone would wonder why he married Mrs. Hollis. You wouldn't look at him twice if you saw him walk-

ing along a street. He had loosened his tie, and as he talked with Aunt Lou he set the suitcase down on the walk and took a rumpled-looking handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his forehead. He looked hot and tired and wrinkled, like somebody coming home from a long week of traveling at some dreary job. I thought it was very depressing.

At last he picked up the suitcase and came on up the walk toward the house. I drew back into the dimness of the hall, but he didn't look up toward our door. Aunt Lou went back to cutting her flowers, holding them in her apron, stooping now and then to pull at a weed she spotted. I stayed behind the screen until Mr. Hollis was out of sight around the corner of the house. I watched the top of his head going along the side of the porch.

I wished just once we would get some exciting, glamorous people to live in the apartment—a woman dripping with jewelry and furs, a man driving up in a sports car upholstered in red leather . . .

Mr. Hollis' car stood at the curb, covered with road dust, with black-walled tires and one dented fender. It was at least five years old, maybe more. Beyond stretched the same quiet, sunny street I had been looking at since I was born. And in the yard Aunt Lou was cutting flowers just as she had always done.

I wished . . . just once . . . something exciting would happen.

CHAPTER TWO

The first time I saw the two strange men I was uptown sitting in a booth at The Coffee Shop with Kitty-ellen and Amy Banister. We were drinking milk shakes, and my two friends were talking about their vacations. Kitty-ellen was leaving the very next day to go all the way to Denver, Colorado, to visit an aunt and uncle who lived there. Her whole family was going, for a whole month. Amy Banister was going with her mother to visit friends in Chicago for a week.

"Just think of all the darling boys there must be on all those ranches in Colorado," Kitty-ellen said. She sighed happily.

"I bet you won't even meet any, if you get stuck at your aunt and uncle's house all day. How can you?" Amy was always practical. She was small and dark-haired like her mother, with long-lashed grayish-green eyes and very clear ivory skin. She looked as if she would be a famous dancer someday, and if you didn't count the fact that she was already her own most ardent fan, she was very nice.

"We aren't going to be at my aunt and uncle's house all the time," Kitty-ellen said. "We're going to a ranch

for a week, all of us, my aunt and uncle too. A real dude ranch. We're going to ride horses and everything."

The Coffee Shop served a cookie sealed in cellophane with its milk shakes, and I broke the wrapping and took out my cookie. Someday I was going to travel all over the world, to all kinds of places even better than Denver or Chicago. Europe, probably, and places like that. Outside, along Main Street, store awnings stuck out over the sidewalk, offering patches of shade on the street baking in the late-afternoon heat. Across from The Coffee Shop was the shoe store where Aunt Lou had gone to get some bedroom slippers. Next door to it was Mary Ann's Bakery, where I hoped Aunt Lou would stop on her way out of the shoe store.

I felt Kitty-ellen nudge me, and I looked around from the window. She was staring toward the counter which extended along one wall of The Coffee Shop. Her eyes were narrowed into slits. Amy looked around over her shoulder to see what Kitty-ellen was squinting at.

"Look at those two strange men," Kitty-ellen said. She lowered her voice dramatically.

I looked at the counter, and Amy looked over her shoulder again.

"Don't look!" Kitty-ellen hissed at Amy.

"How can I see them if I don't turn around?" Amy asked. "Anyway, what's so strange about them?"

"I don't know . . ." Kitty-ellen hesitated. "Something about the way they came in and sort of looked around at things before they sat down . . ."

There wasn't much to tell one way or the other about

the two men from just the sight of their backs turned to us at the counter.

"You didn't see them come in," Kitty-ellen said. "They look—well, sort of sinister. Wait until they get up. Wait until you see their faces."

Amy looked at me and raised her eyebrows. As the men had only now come in, we might wait some time for them to get up so we could see their faces. And then there might not be anything really strange or sinister about them after all. Kitty-ellen was inclined to exaggerate things. She always said she wanted to grow up to be a spy, which Aunt Lou said was ridiculous, except that it was a change from everybody wanting to be in the movies. ("Everybody" meant me, I guess, because how would she know about the other girls?) I told Aunt Lou I might do something even better than be in the movies. "Is there something better?" she had exclaimed with mock surprise. So I never told her about our ambitions anymore.

While Kitty-ellen imagined that excitement loomed from every doorway of life, I felt that excitement loomed everywhere except in small towns like Green Falls, and Amy Banister did not feel sure excitement loomed anywhere at all. "If there are so many Communists and gangsters and narcotics peddlers, why don't we ever see any?" she had accused one night when she was having supper at our house. My father had looked pale at the thought of Amy meeting anyone like that, but Aunt Lou had said calmly, "The Communists are all in Washington and the gangsters are in Chicago and the narcotics ped-

dlers are in New York City. And you should be very grateful that you are in Green Falls."

"But I'm not going to live here all my life," Amy had said.

"So I've heard," Aunt Lou answered, and my father choked on whatever he was trying to eat and had to drink some water.

"Then do you think I'll meet those people if I go to places like that?" Amy had persisted, not entirely persuaded that such people really existed.

"Well, I hope not," Aunt Lou said, and Amy had looked over at me and lifted her eyebrows in an expression of exasperation, much as she looked at me now about Kitty-ellen's strange men.

We lapsed into temporary silence, watching the backs of the men at the counter. I wished they *were* something exciting, like talent scouts from Hollywood, or FBI men on the trail of a dangerous spy ring. Finally Amy said, "We can't sit here all day, Kitty-ellen. What's so strange about them?"

Kitty-ellen said, "Well, for one thing, if you must know, the tall one is wearing dark glasses. And there's just something strange about them."

When Amy didn't look too impressed about this, Kitty-ellen said, "Indoors. Sunglasses indoors. Doesn't that seem odd to you?"

Just then, almost as if drawn up by the force of our eyes upon him, one of the men, the shorter one, stood up and started back toward the cigarette machine on the wall near the booths. We all looked away, disconcerted and flustered, suddenly sucking hard on our straws. As

the stranger went past us, a coin fell to the floor and rolled to a stop somewhere under the booth where we were sitting. Amy ducked her head down to look, and Kitty-ellen said, "You dropped something, mister."

"Let it go, kid," he muttered. He didn't stop or look back, only fumbled in his pocket for more change for the machine.

Amy could not see where the coin had gone under the booth, and she looked up, shrugging. We could hear the sound of the cigarette machine, and then the man came past us again and went back to his seat at the counter.

"Maybe they're escaped convicts who are really innocent," Kitty-ellen whispered. "Or maybe they're spies or gangsters."

"Oh, Kitty-ellen," Amy said.

Kitty-ellen was unperturbed. "Never mind. Someday some real spy is going to come along, and I'm going to be the only one who realizes it."

Aunt Lou appeared outside the window by the booth where we were sitting, and a moment later she came sailing in the door, and walked unsuspecting past the men at the counter, straight toward us.

"Gee," Amy said, as we watched Aunt Lou coming, "they didn't even shoot her once."

Kitty-ellen tossed her head and ignored Amy.

Aunt Lou sat down in the empty place next to Amy, and several small packages cascaded onto the seat between them. "I was going to have some ice cream," she said, arranging the packages, "but I see what time it is and I guess we'd better get on home, Elizabeth."

Then she stopped and looked around at us thoughtfully. "All right," she said, "what is it now?"

"Kitty-ellen has found some foreign spies," Amy said. She rolled her eyes back as if over her shoulder toward the counter.

Aunt Lou did not even turn around. She sighed heavily and closed her eyes. I think she thought when she opened them, if she prayed hard, she might find herself at home in her own kitchen and not have to listen to us anymore.

But at last she opened her eyes. "Kitty-ellen is always finding something," she said matter-of-factly.

Kitty-ellen smiled back serenely. "Spies *or* gangsters," she corrected Amy.

Kitty-ellen had very curly, almost black, hair, and dark eyes, which she squinted again toward the men sitting at the counter. Her father had a photo-supply and card shop down the street, and her mother played the organ at church. Aunt Lou had known Kitty-ellen's parents all her life. Everybody knew everybody all their lives in Green Falls, and in Green Falls there were no spies or gangsters. With or without sunglasses.

"Let's go home and make something cool for supper," Aunt Lou said to me. She gathered up the packages, and I noticed that one was from Mary Ann's Bakery. We said good-bye to Amy and Kitty-ellen, and as we got up, the men at the end of the counter were just getting up too. One of them was very tall, with long arms and square shoulders, which gave him an odd look, as if a child had drawn him—and colored him, too, for his seer-

sucker suit was a queer light shade of brown, almost like maple candy. Dark glasses closed off his face.

The other man was smaller and rather ordinary looking, wearing dark trousers and a light sport jacket. He was smoking one of the cigarettes from the pack he had bought in the machine, eyes squinted against a curl of smoke.

They stood there by the counter stools, and the tall man reached out one of his long arms and drew their check across the counter toward him. It was face down and he turned it over to see what he owed. His hand was huge, with large-knuckled fingers dark from the sun.

And then, as though sensing that I was watching him, he looked up and for a moment seemed to stare straight at me through the dark glasses. It gave me a queer feeling, which I could not possibly have explained to anyone, even Kitty-ellen.

I followed Aunt Lou outside, where she unlocked her car door, rolled down the window, stared in at the sun-heated interior and said, "Well, I don't look forward to this very much." Then we got in and held the doors open a minute to let as much air in as possible while she started the engine. Behind us, Kitty-ellen and Amy waved through the window of The Coffee Shop, and I saw the two men come out into the sunlight and stand in the doorway looking off down the street as though they had nothing else to do in the world.

My father was away, and Aunt Lou and I ate in the kitchen that night. Through the screen door we could see the birds pecking at scraps of bread thrown on the

grass in the back yard. Fat lilac bushes screened off the alley. It was a long yard, sloping down toward the back, and a swing had once hung from an elm tree at the end of the yard. My father had put it up for me when I was eight years old. I had had my tonsils out that summer, and he had asked me what I especially would like to have. "A swing like Bobby Thompson has," I said. And the next day my father put one up, even bigger and stronger and newer than Bobby Thompson's.

It was the same summer I kept caterpillars in empty mayonnaise jars with holes punched in the lids. I went into the yard every morning and collected leaves to poke down into the jars for their breakfast. All the other kids along the block wanted to start keeping caterpillars too, and the kids whose mothers wouldn't let them came around and watched our caterpillars and said things like, "Aren't you afraid you'll get worms inside you from playing with those caterpillars?"

After supper I helped Aunt Lou wash the dishes, and I told her about Kitty-ellen's and Amy's vacations. When the dishes were dried and put away, we went out on the front porch. I was still thinking about Kitty-ellen and Amy going away for their vacations, and wondering why everybody seemed to be going someplace except me, when Mr. and Mrs. Hollis came along the side of the house and around to the front steps.

"Why, hello," Aunt Lou said. "How are you this evening?"

"We're just fine," Mrs. Hollis said, "just fine."

"Is everything all right upstairs?" Aunt Lou asked.

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Hollis said. "Everything is so

nice. It's such a nice apartment, Miss Carrington. Isn't it nice, Barney?"

Mr. Hollis stood slightly in back of his wife, as if he didn't feel he knew us as well as she did and he'd just let her be the spokesman.

"Yes, yes, it's very nice," he said, nodding politely up at Aunt Lou.

"We were just wondering if you could suggest any good restaurant in town. We're going out for dinner. I guess Barney's had enough of my awful cooking for this week." Mrs. Hollis smiled at her husband over her shoulder. He smiled at her, and Aunt Lou pursed up her mouth and tried to think of a good restaurant in town. I thought I could save her the trouble.

"There aren't any good restaurants in town," I said. I came to the edge of the porch and sat on the railing. Mr. and Mrs. Hollis looked up at me and waited.

"I'm afraid she's right," Aunt Lou admitted. "There are a couple of lunchrooms, and Pete's Hamburger Palace." She looked over at me because she knew I went there every day for lunch when we were in school and she thought it was a terrible hangout and no good would come of going there. "But I don't think you want to go to any of those places."

"Well, we'll find something," Mr. Hollis said.

"We just thought maybe you might know of a place, living here and all," Mrs. Hollis said. She had on a blue-and-white flowered dress and a string of pearls. She was wearing the old white pumps, but the broken strap didn't show in the fading light, and she really looked rather nice, I thought.

"There's a restaurant about five miles out of town on Route Ten," Aunt Lou said, pointing the direction. "It's called The Apple Cabin. The food is good. It's kind of rustic, but pretty. It's kind of a landmark around here, you might say."

"I like rustic places," Mrs. Hollis said. "Maybe we'll try it."

Then she looked at me and said, "How are you tonight, Elizabeth?"

"Oh, I'm fine."

"Elizabeth is in mourning because she's not going away to Europe this summer," Aunt Lou said.

Mrs. Hollis looked sympathetic. "I know just how you feel, Elizabeth," she said. "But there'll be lots of summers you can go away. Lots of summers." She paused a moment. "Maybe some afternoon we can go to a movie or something—you know Barney's away all week on his job—" She stopped, remembering something, and drew her husband around toward us. "But you haven't met Barney yet, have you? Well, this is Barney, Elizabeth. Barney, this is Elizabeth."

"Hello," I said.

The man smiled up at me. "Hello, Elizabeth," he said very formally. He *had* been good-looking once, I thought. He still would be nice, even with his graying hair, if he just had some better clothes, and if he stood up a little straighter.

"I knew Barney didn't meet you," Mrs. Hollis said, "because the day he came I said to him, 'Did you meet the pretty girl who lives downstairs?' and he said no, he

just met Miss Carrington in the front yard. And then I said—didn't I, Barney?—'well, you have got to meet that nice girl Elizabeth one of these days.' "

Mr. Hollis was smiling at his wife as she talked. He seemed to like to hear her talk. He acted as if everything she said were important to him.

"Well, I guess we'd better go now," Mrs. Hollis said then. She looked at Aunt Lou and then at me. "I suppose you two have already had your dinner."

"Oh, yes," Aunt Lou said. "An hour ago."

"Elizabeth's probably hungry again," Mrs. Hollis said. "Wouldn't you like to come with us, Elizabeth?"

"Oh, thank you, but I couldn't eat anything more . . ."

She seemed reluctant to leave me there, mourning for a vacation.

"Can't we drive you somewhere, to the movies or someplace?" she asked.

"Sure," Mr. Hollis said. "We'd be glad to drive you somewhere."

"Thanks, but I guess I'll just stay home tonight," I said.

"That's very nice of you," Aunt Lou said to them. "Thank you anyway."

"Well, then." Mrs. Hollis smiled up at me once more. "We'll be going, I guess."

"Good night," Mr. Hollis said.

They went together down the walk toward the street, where their car was parked. "That was nice of them," Aunt Lou said again. "Imagine offering to take us

along." She shook her head thoughtfully, smiling to herself. "It's nice they're going out. I hope they have a real good time."

She sat down on the porch rocker, and we watched Mr. and Mrs. Hollis get into their car. The headlights flicked on into the street, and they pulled away from the curb.

It seemed very quiet after they had driven away. Aunt Lou swatted at a mosquito and began to rock a little, and I leaned back against the porch post and listened. There was nothing to hear but a train whistling in the night, far away out of town.

CHAPTER THREE

I saw the two men from The Coffee Shop again the very next day. I had gone over to the library on my bicycle after lunch to return some books for Aunt Lou, and I was standing by the magazine rack by the window when I noticed the men. They were across the street at Mrs. Corey's house. To be exact, they were coming down Mrs. Corey's front steps. Mrs. Corey rented rooms, and I thought the men must have rented a room from her, for they stood a moment on the steps and casually lit up cigarettes, as if they belonged there, like people renting a room would belong. Then they walked through the yard to the street and got into a car parked at the curb. It was rather an ordinary-looking car, dusty . . . covered with road dust . . . it made me think of Barney Hollis' car when he came back from his trip showing housewares displays to grocers.

It was a dark day and the lights were on in the library. There had been rain during the morning, and it felt like there was more to come. The air was cool and damp, and there was a silence to the streets as if everyone had gone into their houses because of the rain. The library was almost deserted—except for Miss Clarke at the desk and me by the magazine rack.

I stared as the men got into the car and drove down the street. They drove slowly, not hurrying to get anyplace, and I watched them go. I wondered what Kitty-ellen would think of their renting a room at Mrs. Corey's. The library seemed very gloomy suddenly, and I put back the magazine I had taken from the rack. Miss Clarke was still at the desk, looking through a card file. The street door creaked, and then two little boys came running in toward the children's room. "No running, please," Miss Clarke said in a soft voice. It must have been from habit, for there was no one to disturb in the library. I was the only one there, and I was leaving.

As I went out, Miss Clarke looked up and smiled. "Bye, now," she said. I wondered if it bothered her to be the only one in the library. It was such a gloomy old dark day. If I were she, I thought, I'd want some other people in the library. I looked back at her once more as I went out the door. She was bent over the cards again, a pencil stuck behind her ear for a moment to have both hands free. Above her head, on the wall behind the desk, was a clock with hands pointing to two thirty, and a sign that said QUIET PLEASE.

I got on my bike and pedaled slowly along the street toward Kitty-ellen's house. I wanted to tell her I had seen the men again, and that I thought they were staying at Mrs. Corey's.

When I got to Kitty-ellen's house, I left my bike by the steps and went up on the front porch. But the door was closed and so were all the windows, and no one answered the bell.

"They've already left for their vacation," Mrs. Benson

next door called to me. She had come out on her porch and was shaking a tablecloth over the side railing. Roses climbed a trellis beside her house, and two small tricycles had been turned on their sides and abandoned against the edge of the trellis.

"Are you sure?" I said.

"Saw them drive away myself about nine this morning," Mrs. Benson said. "They got a good early start."

"Well . . . thank you," I said. If Kitty-ellen was gone, there was nobody to tell. I walked to the steps and stood there, reluctant to go. Grapevines hung like a curtain at the far end of the porch, and I could smell the sweet odor of the damp leaves.

"Better get on home before it rains again," Mrs. Benson said. "Sky's getting pretty dark."

Then she went inside her house, and after a moment I could hear her scolding one of her little children. Then a screen door slammed at the back of the house and I heard her call, "Now you stay close by the house, it's going to rain."

I went down the steps and got on my bike again and started home.

Twice that night during supper I started to tell Aunt Lou about seeing the men at Mrs. Corey's. But now that I was home again and had had time to think about it some more, it began to seem less important. Aunt Lou would probably only say I was getting as silly as Kitty-ellen.

"Whatever is the matter with you tonight, Elizabeth?" Aunt Lou said once during supper. She had gone into the pantry to get plates for the cake we were going to have for dessert, and I was supposed to be cutting the cake. I was only sitting looking at it. "Are you still brooding about not going away on a vacation this summer?"

"No," I said; "I'm not brooding about anything."

"That'll be the day," Aunt Lou said to herself. But she seemed rather cheerful, and after supper she took her sewing into the living room to watch *Quiz Me*, her favorite TV program.

That night, lying in bed, I could hear the rain begin again. Then I heard Mr. Hollis come to the apartment kitchen window that was on the same side of the house as my bedroom, and say, "It's raining again."

I had rearranged my bedroom furniture a few months before, and with my bed by the windows I could hear people talking in the apartment kitchen sometimes, if the weather was warm enough for the windows to be open. Mr. Hollis must have been standing right by the window looking out, for I heard his voice very clearly. He must have been standing there looking down into the side yard, at the wet glistening leaves of the lilac bushes and the pavements under the street lamp dark and shiny from the rain that had just fallen.

"Oh, Barney, what if they find us?" I heard Mrs. Hollis say. Her voice was as near as his, as if she had come to join him at the window. But she was talking softly and I could just barely make out what she said. Her voice was

forlorn, not at all like the cheerful chatty way she usually talked.

"Honey, please, don't worry," Mr. Hollis said. His voice was lowered now, like hers. "Look, we're all right now. They won't find us. They probably aren't even looking. Those men want Richie, not us."

"Oh," she said, with a funny sort of sighing sound, "I hope you're right. Oh, I hope we never see them again." There was a pause, and then she said, "I just can't forget about them."

"Look now," he said, "don't worry, will you? Everything's going to be all right." He sounded so comforting I thought surely she must feel better just to hear him talking.

"I guess it's just this rain makes me jittery," Mrs. Hollis said. "Rain always did make me jittery—you know, kind of restless and sad."

It was silent for a moment, then I heard Mr. Hollis say again, "They won't find us, Ruby. Don't be afraid."

Then they must have gone into the living room of the apartment, which was on the other side of the house. I couldn't hear them talking anymore, but I heard music playing. I lay very still, staring at the screen of my window and the roof of the house next door, outlined by the street light against the dark sky. Why should some men be looking for the Hollises? I wondered—and why should Mrs. Hollis be afraid of them? *Don't be afraid,* Mr. Hollis had said. *They won't find us.*

I thought of the two strange men coming down the steps at Mrs. Corey's house.

They won't find us, Mr. Hollis had said. *They probably aren't even looking.*

I sat up suddenly in the darkness. But the men *were* looking, I thought, and they had come to Green Falls. They *were* looking, and they had found Green Falls.

I sat there in bed, shivering and hugging my knees and listening to the rain start to fall harder and harder on the roof. I could hear it hitting the screen, and I thought I ought to get up and see if any rain was coming in on the floor. But I couldn't make myself get up and go over to the window. Thunder sounded in the distance, and lightning flickered a time or two. Then the thunder grew louder and closer; and I finally had to get up. The wind was strong and the rain was coming in through the screen. The sill was wet, and so was the floor under the window. I had to tug at the window to get it down, and then I stood there and watched the storm, the terrible flashes of lightning that lit up everything, and the thunder that crashed overhead in the darkness.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning Mr. Hollis had to leave again on his job. I was reading on the porch and I saw Mrs. Hollis walk out to the car with him and kiss him good-bye right on the street.

Everything seemed different in the daylight. The storm was over and the sun was shining. I was not sure what I had really thought the night before, and what might have been a half-asleep dream. Certainly there did not seem to be anything ominous about Piermont Street in the fresh, sunlit morning after the storm.

Mrs. Hollis stood with one hand held up to shield her eyes from the sun, watching as Mr. Hollis drove away. She had on the same cotton dress she'd been wearing the day she came, and the flat straw shoes and no stockings. At last she walked back toward the house slowly, twitching a thin twig she had pulled from one of the bushes by the walk.

"Hi, Elizabeth," she said, when she saw me sitting on the swing.

"Hi," I said.

Just then Aunt Lou came to the screen door. "Mailman come yet, Elizabeth?" she asked, and then she caught sight of Mrs. Hollis. "Why, hello, Mrs. Hollis."

"Hello, Miss Carrington. I've just been saying goodbye to Barney. He's gone again."

Aunt Lou pushed open the screen door and came out on the porch. She was drying her hands on her apron. "Is that so?" she said. "Well, I surely know how it is, these jobs that take men away from home. Elizabeth's father is gone a lot on his job, too."

"Is he? I didn't know that," Mrs. Hollis said. She sounded so sociable and friendly, as though she had nothing else to think about except what a nice summer morning it was. It was hard to imagine she could ever sound forlorn and frightened, as she had the night before.

"Yes, indeed," Aunt Lou said. "He works for the Miller Farm Implement Company. I guess you've heard of them."

"No," Mrs. Hollis said regretfully, "I'm afraid I haven't."

"Well, anyway," Aunt Lou said, "it's a big company. Elizabeth's father has worked for them a long time. Sometimes he's only gone overnight, but other times he'll be gone a month or more."

Mrs. Hollis looked over her shoulder down the street, empty now. Overhead the elms spread like lacy fans against the sky. "Well, Barney won't be more than a few days, I guess."

"It's not so bad when you get used to it," Aunt Lou said. "Well, I better get back to my work. Will you bring the mail in when it comes, Elizabeth?"

"Okay," I said. And when everyone was gone, I put my feet back on the railing again and sat staring down

the street with a vaguely unsatisfied feeling. Before long, Aunt Lou came back with an aluminum pie tin covered with a paper napkin.

"Take these cookies up to Mrs. Hollis, will you, Elizabeth," she said. "They're just fresh out of the oven and she might like some with her lunch."

"All right." I got up and closed the book which I hadn't been reading anyway. I went along the sidewalk on the old cobblestones, and up the narrow side stairway. Before I got to the top I heard a record begin to play. It was the one Mrs. Hollis played most often, "The Blue Tango."

When I got to the top of the stairs I could see her standing by the phonograph, moving her head in time to the music, lifting her hands with the rhythm. I knocked on the door frame and she turned around quickly with a startled expression.

"Oh—it's you, Elizabeth."

"My aunt made some cookies," I said. I held up the pie tin so she could see.

"How nice. Well, my goodness, come in, come in." She opened the door and stood back, and as I stepped in she let the door close. "My, this is awfully thoughtful of your aunt," she said.

I handed her the cookies and she took them and smiled at me.

"I'll save the plate for your aunt," she offered.

"I don't think she wants that back," I said. "That's just a pie plate you get with frozen pies. Aunt Lou buys them sometimes when it's too hot to bake."

Mrs. Hollis took off the paper napkin. "Chocolate

chip," she said. She made it sound like her favorite kind. I wished Aunt Lou could have heard her.

"Aunt Lou thought maybe you'd like them with your lunch," I said.

"Oh . . . yes . . ." Mrs. Hollis looked bewildered a moment. Then she smiled sheepishly. "I'm afraid I didn't notice that it was lunch time. When Barney's not here, I don't bother with regular meals. What time is it?" She found a Baby Ben alarm clock on a table by the sofa and turned it around to see the face. "Why, it *is* nearly twelve, isn't it?"

The record reached the end, and she clicked off the phonograph. "Why don't you stay and have lunch with me, Elizabeth?" she said impulsively. "I'll make some sandwiches and coffee—oh, I don't suppose you drink coffee—well, we have some Cokes in the ice box; I bet you like those, don't you?"

I hesitated, and she said, "Oh, I wish you would, Elizabeth. It would be fun for me to fix you some lunch. Run down and ask your aunt if it will be all right." Then she added suddenly, "Oh, I hope she hasn't made you anything yet."

She looked so disappointed at the thought that Aunt Lou might have my lunch ready that I found myself saying, "Oh, no, I'm sure she hasn't got it made yet."

"Then run down and ask her if you can't eat up here with me. It would be a real treat for me, tell her," she said.

"All right," I said. "If you're sure it won't be too much trouble."

"It won't be any trouble at all. Now you hurry."

When I came back, Mrs. Hollis had already begun to set plates and paper napkins out on the kitchen table.

"Is it all right?" she asked, looking up.

"Yes, it's all right," I said. I went to the doorway between the living room and kitchen and watched while she finished setting the table and began to make some sandwiches.

"Do you like toasted cheese?" she asked. "That's Barney's favorite."

"Toasted cheese is swell," I said.

"Sit down." She motioned to one of the chairs drawn up to the table.

"Can't I do anything?"

"No, no. I'll just fix these sandwiches. You just sit down and talk to me."

I sat down, but I couldn't think of anything to talk about. I watched her spread the bread with butter and put the slices in a frying pan. She put the cheese on, and the top slices of bread. Then she went to the refrigerator and took out two bottles of Coke. In one of the kitchen drawers she found a bottle opener. She got two glasses out of a cupboard and put those on the table, and holding a Coke in each hand she poured both glasses at the same time. "Barney always does it this way," she said, smiling at me across the table.

She passed a glass over to me. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" she teased.

"Oh . . . no . . ." I said. But I still couldn't think of anything to say. I took a sip of the drink, and she turned the sandwiches to toast the other side.

"Those look real good, Mrs. Hollis," I said.

"Why don't you call me Ruby," she said. "Don't you think that would be nicer?"

"All right," I said, "if you want me to."

"Ruby, now you remember," she said. The sandwiches were done, and she put them on plates and sliced them down the middle. She put one plate in front of me and kept the other herself. Then she sat down at the table. "Oops—almost forgot our cookies," she said, and she got up again and went into the living room, where she had left the aluminum pie plate on one of the tables. "Can't forget these, can we?" She put them in the center of the kitchen table.

"Go ahead now, eat," she said.

"It's very good," I said, ". . . Ruby."

"That's the way." She nodded with approval. "My sister's name is Pearl. My mother said we were her precious gems, the only ones she was likely to get on the salary my father made. He was a switchman for the railroad." She laughed cheerfully. "And my mother had a name all picked out for the next one—Opal."

I stared at her in fascination. Ruby and Pearl weren't *too* bad; but who could name a baby Opal!

"But my mother never had any more after Pearl and me."

"Say," she said, looking up from her sandwich after a moment, "why don't we go to a movie this afternoon? What's playing at that—what's the name?" She snapped her fingers and closed her eyes.

"The Green Falls Theater," I said. "I already saw the picture that's there."

"Oh—you did? Well, it was just an idea. I suppose that's the only one in town?"

I nodded.

"When does the picture change? Maybe we could go then."

"It changes on Fridays," I said.

"Let's go on Friday then," she said. "My treat. What's playing then?"

"I don't remember," I said, and I began to laugh. She laughed too.

"I guess you think I do things pretty suddenly and all, don't you? I mean, like asking you to stay for lunch, making up my mind just like that to go to the show Friday. I've always been like that, though." She paused and seemed to be thinking back over her life reflectively. "Barney can't keep up with me sometimes. 'Hey, slow down, Ruby,' he says to me sometimes. But I know when I want to do something. I just know, you know what I mean?"

"I guess so," I said uncertainly.

"Well, that's all right," she said kindly. "Come on, look at the radio Barney bought me."

She got up and went into the living room and brought back a tiny transistor radio. She tuned it in to some music and set it on the table in front of me.

"Isn't that nice?" she said. "I can put it right under my pillow when I go to bed at night and hear music."

"I bet that's fun," I said.

"Sure it's fun. It's like a secret when you hear it that way. Like the music is playing just for you." She paused

a moment and looked at me. "I guess I've just got a thing about music. I like to hear it playing all the time. Come on, want to hear some more of my records?"

"Shouldn't we wash the dishes?"

"Wash the dishes? What dishes? Come on, come on." She drew me into the living room and pushed me gently down in the chair.

"Play that one again—that one you were playing when I came."

" 'The Blue Tango?' " she said. "All right. That's my favorite. I play it a lot, I guess probably too much. Barney must be tired of it, but he always says he's not."

She put on the record and we listened a minute. Then she turned to me and said, "It's like whenever that music's playing, everything is all right; you know what I mean?"

Her neck wouldn't look so long if she would let her hair grow, I thought, and if she got a higher-necked dress. She wouldn't be beautiful or anything like that, but she did have a nice figure, and she could make her neck look shorter.

I noticed things lying around the room, on the furniture that so many people had used before them—a pink dressing gown lay over the arm of the sofa; a straw purse was on top of the bookcase; Barney's ties hung on a wire hanger on the knob of the closet door. On one of the tables were five or six rolls of Life Saver candy, and Ruby saw me looking at them. "I guess you've been wondering who eats all the Life Savers," she said. "Barney. He puts them in his coat pockets. He's always got to have Life Savers around. I like candy too, but my taste runs more

for things like chocolate bars and fudge, if you know what I mean."

"Me too," I said.

"Well, then I don't guess you'd like some of Barney's Life Savers?"

"No, I guess not, thanks."

"Why don't you have some more cookies then?"

"I'm pretty full," I said. ("Don't eat all those cookies I sent up," Aunt Lou had said when I asked about having lunch with Mrs. Hollis. "Those are for her; we've got ours down here.")

"It's so nice to have someone to talk to," Ruby said. "Here I got up this morning and I thought, well, this is going to be one long lonely day, Barney going away again —and now just look, here we are."

I watched her moving her head in time to the phonograph music. I wondered why the men were looking for her and why she was frightened of them. I wanted to say something to her about it, but I didn't know how to begin.

On Friday afternoon when we went to the movie I was still wondering whether I should say anything to Ruby. (I thought of her very easily now as Ruby instead of Mrs. Hollis; but Aunt Lou always referred to her as Mrs. Hollis.) I had kept my eyes open for the two strange men, but I had not seen them around anymore. Maybe I never would see them again, I thought.

The Green Falls Theater wasn't much of a theater, but at least it was open, which was more than could be said of the other theater in town, which had closed up

forever several years before—another sign of the progressive and exciting way of life in Green Falls. But Ruby seemed satisfied with the theater. We bought popcorn at the candy counter in the lobby and looked at the posters advertising the pictures that were coming the next weeks.

The movie was over at four thirty, and Ruby wanted to buy sodas at the drugstore next door to the theater.

"Come on, Elizabeth," she said, taking my arm, "I bet you can have a chocolate soda and still be hungry for your supper by the time we get home."

We sat at the counter, near the front door, and I was finished first so I went to the cosmetic counter at the back to get a new lipstick. I had already bought three of My Sweetheart lipstick's six new summer shades: Raspberry Pink, Coral Pink, and Candystick; I'd been saving for Apricot Gold. Kitty-ellen had all the shades, but she had used up all her birthday money on them and her mother didn't particularly like that. I missed Amy and Kitty-ellen. Buying the lipstick would have been more fun with them to help me. I wondered if Kitty-ellen had gone to the dude ranch yet and met any boys.

As I came back through the drugstore I saw that Ruby had gone up to the counter by the door to pay for the sodas, and the two men I had seen in The Coffee Shop and by the library had come from somewhere and stood beside her, talking to her.

I couldn't see Ruby's face, and the two men seemed to be surrounding her, holding her away from—from what? From help, perhaps—or from escape.

I had been right. These were the men. They had been

looking for the Hollises and they had found them. Now what would happen?

The clerk had rung up the check and was putting Ruby's change on the glass countertop. Then he went around to another counter near by to unpack some new stock that had come in. Ruby had bought some candy bars and was holding them in her hand. She didn't even seem to notice her change. Her face, turned up to the taller man's, was white and frightened looking.

Then the men saw me, and Ruby turned around toward me.

"Oh, Elizabeth," she said. Her voice sounded strange, not at all like her usual voice. "Did—did you get your lipstick?"

She stepped away from the men and took my arm and drew me toward the door. She had forgotten her change, but nobody else seemed to notice. The two men did not try to stop us or come after us, but I had a good look at their faces for the first time.

The tall man's face was very ugly, I thought, long and square-chinned. He looked better with his sunglasses on; his eyes were very small and pale and squinty—as if light hurt them. He rubbed them as though they were sore. The smaller man was younger looking, and he had a round face with odd smooth skin. He looked me up and down with an insinuating expression that made my skin crawl.

"Who are they?" I asked when we were safely outside. It was a great relief to talk about the men at last and not wonder whether I ought to tell Ruby they were in town. Now she knew for herself.

"Nobody, nobody," she answered quickly. "They thought they knew me, but they had me mixed up with somebody else."

She seemed to be walking very fast, and I hurried to keep up with her. Her face was strained, and she didn't talk anymore on the rest of the way home.

When we got to our house, Aunt Lou was sitting on the porch.

"How was the movie?" she said, ready to visit a while.

But Ruby only said, "It was fine, Miss Carrington." Her eyes had a distracted look, as though she could hardly think what movie Aunt Lou was even talking about.

Aunt Lou started to say something about Mr. Graham, who owned the theater, being an old friend of ours, but Ruby wasn't listening. She went off around the side of the porch toward the apartment stairs, and Aunt Lou looked puzzled for a moment and then shrugged and said, "Well, come on in, Elizabeth, supper's ready."

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning while we were eating breakfast I looked over the newspaper, with no clearly formed idea of what I was looking for but with a hazy feeling that I just might find something . . . I wasn't sure what. I sat at the kitchen table with my feet hooked back in the rungs of the chair and drank the orange juice Aunt Lou handed me.

The milkman knocked at the back screen and held up his collection book. "It's that time of the week again, Miss Carrington."

"Hello, Joe." Aunt Lou opened the screen. "Come on in."

"Four twenty-six, Miss Carrington."

Aunt Lou always kept money handy on one of the pantry shelves for paying the cleaner and paper boy and milkman. She brought out the old red leather change purse and counted the money into Joe's hand.

"Four twenty-six from four thirty. Okay." He reached around to his back pocket and came up with a handful of change, sorted through it and handed some pennies back to Aunt Lou. "Going to be a nice day today," he said. "Getting kind of warm already, though."

"Whew." Aunt Lou shook her head. "When it's this hot this early in the day, I know it's going to be too hot for me."

Joe made an entry in his book and tore out a slip for Aunt Lou. He was thin and wiry and ageless looking; he had been knocking on our back door to collect every week since I could remember, and he never looked any older as the years went by. He said, "Supposed to be eighty-five today, weatherman says."

"I like seventy-five a lot better," Aunt Lou answered.

"How're you today, Elizabeth?" Joe said.

"Just fine, thanks."

"That's good." He closed up his collection book. "Well, guess that's all for today."

"Good-bye," Aunt Lou looked at me and I looked up from the paper again. "Oh, good-bye," I said.

Joe went out, whistling as he went along the side of the house. We heard him say, "Good morning" to someone, and we heard Ruby Hollis' voice answering. She must have been sitting on the side steps.

I folded the newspaper and unlocked my feet from the rungs. There was nothing in the paper that seemed to be what I was, vaguely, looking for. What did you expect, silly? I asked myself. Headlines saying, "Two mysterious men are following the people who have rented the apartment at Elizabeth Carrington's house"—with a nice photograph of me, caption reading, "Elizabeth Carrington, Sophomore at Green Falls High School."

Ruby was waiting for her husband. I could tell she was. Twice that morning when I was coming along the

street on my bicycle I saw her looking down toward the street from the window in the kitchen of the apartment, watching for his car to come.

Or was she watching for the men? I wondered. Maybe she thought they would come here looking for her someday. I half expected them myself, and whenever a car stopped outside I went to the window to look. Once that afternoon, lying on my bed reading, I heard steps running along the cobblestone walk below my windows, and I got up and tried to see who was down there. I couldn't see for a moment, until the person who was running got all the way to the back of the house by our yard. Then I saw it was only one of the boys who lived down the block, chasing his cat.

"Hey, you—come on here," he called, and dived under one of the lilac bushes, dragging out a meowing, struggling cat. Ruby was sitting on the steps again; I could see her from my window. She called to the boy, "Hi, there." When he looked up to see who had spoken to him, she said, "That's a nice-looking kitty you've got." The boy tried to hold the writhing cat and looked up into the sun at Ruby. He had a baseball cap on backward and overalls rolled up at the ankles.

"I gave her a swat for chasing birds, and she ran away," he said.

"Oh, that's too bad," Ruby said. Her voice seemed to hold some wistful sadness for kitties that got swatted as well as birds that were stalked by cats. "Well, I guess you've got her now all right."

The boy ran off, and I sat back on the edge of my bed. Finally I went downstairs and walked around the side of

the house. I thought maybe Ruby would ask me to come up and hear her records or something—but she had gone inside, and I hesitated a minute, and then I got my bike and went for a ride. I went to the top of Fuller Street, which was a hill, and coasted back down.

Barney Hollis came back that night about ten o'clock. I had just gone to bed when I heard the car stop in front of the house, the door close, and after a moment steps coming around the side of the house. I heard the phonograph go off in the apartment, and then the door open at the top of the steps. "Oh, Barney, I'm so glad you're back. I've been—" The rest was lost as they went inside.

I lay awake, thinking and trying to figure things out, and after a while I heard them come into the kitchen. The cupboards of the kitchen were next to my bedroom wall, and I could always hear, softly, the sounds of the cupboards opening and sometimes the click of dishes.

I heard a chair scrape back as someone sat down at the table, and after a little silence, Ruby said, "Coffee'll be ready in a minute."

"Come on and sit down; relax, honey," Barney said.

"Why won't they believe us, Barney? We don't know where Richie went and we don't know what he did with the money. Why won't they believe us! Do they think we look like we have a lot of money?" She sounded discouraged.

"They won't believe us because they don't want to admit they've lost Richie. We were the last to see him, and they hate to lose the trail. We're all they've got to go on. But it can't last forever—they'll have to admit to

themselves sooner or later that Richie didn't tell us where he was going or where, if anyplace, he hid the money. Maybe he didn't put it anywhere; maybe he's got it with him."

"All that money," Ruby murmured.

"But they'll give up watching us," Barney said. "I just thought if we could get away from them you wouldn't be upset like you were, and we wouldn't have to wonder every day if Richie was going to turn up again and in what kind of new trouble."

He paused, then continued, "So it didn't work; they found us. Let's stick it out here anyway, Ruby. Those men will move on eventually. You think they're going to spend their whole lives hanging around this town listening to us say we don't know where Richie is? They're just sore losers, Ruby, and we're the last link they have to Richie."

Ruby didn't answer, and I heard the refrigerator open and close. I guessed they were drinking their coffee. After a silence, Barney said, "Listen, I'll stay home for a while. We'll just sit tight and see what happens. This is a nice little town, don't you think, honey? We might as well stick it out here as anyplace."

"I suppose so," she said.

"Let's just stick it out and wait and see what happens. Pretty soon they're going to get tired hanging around here, take my word for it."

"I don't know, Barney, it just doesn't seem that simple to me," Ruby said. "Sometimes I lie awake at night wondering what they're planning, what they're going to do to us."

"They aren't going to do anything to us," he was saying, but she interrupted him. "They must have some plan," she insisted. "They just won't give up—sometimes I think they *will* follow us around all the rest of our lives."

"Honey—you're just talking crazy now. They don't care about us. They want Richie. Pretty soon they're going to get it through their heads that we just don't know where Richie is and we don't know where that money is. I'll stay home this next week. I'll call Mr. Edgars tomorrow and tell him I can't make any calls this week—and by that time those men will be long gone, you'll see."

"I hope so," Ruby said. She sounded as if she wanted to believe what he said, if only she could.

"After all, I've got to have some job, and this one isn't so bad. We're just getting settled here now—this apartment is nice, not too big maybe, but it's nice for us. You like it, don't you?"

"Sure, I like it," Ruby said. Her voice was a little more cheerful. "I like it here real well."

There was another pause, and then Barney said, "Hey, come on—look at the things I brought you." He got up and I heard him walking, then he came back to the kitchen and I could hear bumping sounds like something falling on the table.

"One of every kind of candy bar they had in the store," he said.

"Oh, Barney—how can I ever eat so many!" Ruby was laughing. "Oh, *Bar*ney."

"That's not all. How about this? It's a cosmetic tray.

You know, you put it on the shelf in the bathroom cabinet. I guess this is where the lipsticks go—see—keeps everything organized."

"Oh, Barney, that's real nice."

"Gen-u-ine plastic."

I heard something rap on the kitchen table lightly, and they both laughed.

"And that's still not all."

"Oh, Barney."

But they had gone into the other room, I guess, because I couldn't hear what they were saying anymore, just the distant murmur of their voices, and sometimes when Ruby laughed I could hear that. It made me think of how my father had brought me things when he came home when I was a little girl. He still did bring me things sometimes, but not as often now that I was growing up. Sometimes he brought little presents for Aunt Lou, too.

I thought about my father, working and traveling all those years alone after my mother died, bringing presents to Aunt Lou and me, and always quiet and alone himself somehow—with fresh starchy white shirts, rolling up the sleeves carefully when he sat down to work on his stamp albums. And I thought of Aunt Lou, who had always taken care of us, taken care of me, and never had a family or children of her own . . . and I began to sense that there were deeper currents to living than I had known yet, as though I had so far only lived on the surface of things, looking at my own reflection. My room seemed quiet and lonely, with the faint sound of Ruby's laughter now and then as though from far, far away.

I wished Barney and Ruby would come back into the kitchen so I could hear them talking some more, and I wondered what other presents he was showing her.

By and by they did come back into the kitchen, at least Barney did. I heard a chair scrape across the floor by the table, and then he said, "Oh-oh, coffee's cold."

Ruby said something about warming the coffee. I couldn't understand exactly what she said because she was still in the living room, speaking to Barney from there.

"No, never mind," he said. "Hey, let's have some of that music you like so much."

Ruby had come into the kitchen. "Oh, I bet you're tired of those records."

"Try me," Barney said.

I heard the kitchen chair move again, and by and by "The Blue Tango" started.

"You always were the best dancer I knew," Barney said, and then I could hear only the phonograph music.

They were dancing, I thought; they were dancing to "The Blue Tango." I listened, and when the record had finished they started it over again. I thought about the presents Barney had bought for Ruby, and how she was always saying how handsome he was . . . why, they were in love, I thought, just like rich, handsome people with beautiful clothes and expensive cars. They were in love with each other and they were dancing together there in that little apartment in the still dark summer night. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Aunt Lou noticed that Mr. Hollis didn't seem to be traveling anymore. He was home two days, then three, then a whole week.

"I see Mr. Hollis isn't traveling much these days," she said politely to Ruby one afternoon when Ruby came around the side of the house to go grocery shopping. A plastic shopping bag was folded and sticking out of the top of her straw tote-bag purse. She was wearing dark glasses and straw sandals, and no stockings.

"No, he didn't have to go this week," Ruby said. She kept the sunglasses on while she talked, and to me it was always like talking to a blank face when people had sunglasses on. You couldn't tell what they were really thinking when you couldn't see their eyes.

"That's kind of a change for you, I guess," Aunt Lou said.

"It sure is," Ruby said. "But I suppose next week or so he'll be going again." Then she looked over toward me and said, "Maybe we can go to a movie one of these days."

"Sure," I said.

"Elizabeth's always ready for a movie," Aunt Lou said.

"Me too," Ruby answered. "When I was a kid you know what I used to do? I used to go to a movie every afternoon in the summer. We had three theaters in the town where I lived, and they used to change twice a week. My sister Pearl and I saw every movie that ever came. The ones we liked best we used to go back and see again. There were a couple I remember we saw three or four times."

"Sounds like watching reruns on TV," Aunt Lou said.

"That's right." Ruby laughed. "It was sort of like that. We had lots of fun. And we had magazine pictures of all our favorite stars stuck up around our bedroom."

Mr. Hollis came around the side of the house, jingling car keys in his hand.

"All ready?" Ruby turned and smiled at him. "Barney's taking me shopping," she explained, turning back to the porch and looking up the steps at Aunt Lou. "Is there anything we can get for you at the store, Miss Carrington?"

"Oh, I guess not, thanks," Aunt Lou said. "I did my shopping yesterday, and the bread man's coming around this afternoon."

"Sure now?" Ruby said. Mr. Hollis waited politely beside her.

"How are you, Elizabeth?" he said when he caught sight of me sitting on the swing at the side of the porch.

"Hi," I said.

"I don't know what I would have done without Elizabeth to keep me company the last time you were away," Ruby said to him. "We went to a movie and we got to be real good friends, didn't we?"

I smiled self-consciously, and Barney Hollis said, "Is that so? Well, that's fine." He nodded at me. "I'm glad Ruby has a pretty girl like you to keep her company."

"They both took real good care of me," Ruby said. "Miss Carrington sent me some cookies."

"Oh, shoot," Aunt Lou said, "that wasn't anything."

"They were just delicious, that's what they were," Ruby said. She looked at her husband. "They were about the best cookies I ever tasted, that's all."

"Oh, go on," Aunt Lou said. She was about to burst with pleasure.

After the Hollises had driven off, I got up and went over to Amy Banister's house. She had just come back the day before from her visit to Chicago, and she had lots of things to show me. Her room was full of souvenirs and new dresses and play programs. Seeing all the things made me think about the apartment I was going to have when I grew up and got married, the fancy apartment in New York or San Francisco: I would get up in the morning and look out from my window and see the bay and the Golden Gate Bridge. It made me think again of the silk dresses I was going to have, and the jewelry and perfume and fur coats.

An aura of the glamour of the big city where Amy had been was an almost tangible thing in the room—but Amy herself had very much returned to Green Falls. "I'll walk you home, if we can go down Sycamore Street," she said eagerly, after she had shown me everything and I said I had to get home.

She wanted to go by Jimmy Walker's house, and Sycamore Street was only a block out of the way, so I said I

didn't mind. Before we could go, she disappeared into the bathroom and combed her hair and fixed her face all up as if she were going to a ball.

"Where are you going, dear?" her mother asked as we tried to get out the back door without being noticed.

"I'm just going to walk part way with Elizabeth," Amy said.

Mrs. Banister was already beginning to bread some pork chops for supper, and she looked up at the clock doubtfully. I wondered what everybody would do without clocks; Aunt Lou was always looking at ours and judging everything by what they said.

"All right, but hurry," Mrs. Banister said. Even standing in the kitchen breading pork chops she had a certain elegance about her. All her rings lay lined up on the windowsill over the sink while she worked.

"I will," Amy said; and we walked away briskly until we got out of sight, and then we slowed down and strolled along easily and turned the corner toward Sycamore Street. Amy started talking about her visit to Chicago again, and I felt cut off from her; things were different than before she went away. And yet, I didn't feel like telling her about anything that had happened. Somehow I knew she wasn't really interested in anything except the new clothes she had bought in Chicago and seeing if Jimmy Walker was out in his front yard. Suppose I said, "Amy, do you remember those two sinister men we saw in The Coffee Shop that day—" "Oh, Elizabeth," she would probably interrupt, "you're as bad as Kitty-ellen."

"There he *is*—don't look, don't look," Amy hissed,

and pinched my arm as we started down Sycamore Street. Sure enough, there across the street was her wonderful Jimmy Walker, mowing the grass in his yard. Sitting along his porch railing, their feet hanging down toward the yard, sat two other boys from school, watching Jimmy work. Their tennis shoes hit against the rails. One of them had a baseball and he kept throwing it up over his head and catching it, almost unbalancing himself from the railing.

It was against the rules to look, once you had started down a boy's block. But I was curious to see if the boy throwing the ball wouldn't one time tumble into the bushes under the porch rail. Amy peeked under lowered lids too, but I'm sure she didn't notice anybody but Jimmy. He had on a white shirt that said OHIO STATE U. across the front; his brother went there. We walked so painfully slowly we were almost stopped, before Jimmy saw us and called, "Hey, Amy—hi."

Amy looked up, elaborately surprised. "Oh, hello, Jimmy."

Now that we had been spoken to, it was all right to cross the street, and we went over, still walking slowly, unconcerned, elaborately casual.

"Hi," we said, and Jimmy stopped mowing, probably grateful for any excuse, and came over to the sidewalk. The boys sitting on the porch rail didn't move. One called over, "Hey, Elizabeth, what d'ya say?"

"Hi," I answered. They both squinted out at us from under the bills of their baseball caps.

"When d'you get back?" Jimmy said to Amy.

"Yesterday."

"So, how's the big city?"

"We had lots of fun," Amy said. She smoothed her carefully combed hair and tapped her sunglasses against her teeth to show how sophisticated she was now that she had been to Chicago.

The boys on the railing had moved apart and were sitting astride the railing, throwing the ball back and forth, each trying to throw just far enough out to the side to make the other reach precariously to catch it. Show-offs, I thought to myself.

"Hey, you gonna go to the parade in Bakersville?" Jimmy asked Amy.

"I guess so," Amy said. "We always do go, don't we, Elizabeth?"

Jimmy didn't wait for me to answer. He wasn't very interested in whether I always went to the Fourth of July parade or not. Amy was looking out sweetly from lowered eyes.

"You watch for me, then," Jimmy said. "I'm going to ride on my dad's float. We've been working on it all day over behind the shop. I'm gonna be riding up in the front."

Jimmy's father was a plumber, and I was dying to ask: "What are you going to ride in, a bathtub?" But I refrained heroically, and pretended not to be listening to their conversation. The boys on the railing had stopped throwing the ball. One of them stood up and walked along the railing. It was a wide wooden rail, so I didn't see much daring in that. "Yoo-hoo," he called, mincing back.

"Sure, I'll look for you," Amy promised Jimmy.

"Okay—don't forget now," he said.

At last, reluctantly, Amy said, "I guess we better go," and I said yes, I guessed we'd better.

Smoothing her hair again, Amy said, "Well, so long . . ."

Jimmy said, "Yeah, so long . . ."

When we got to the corner Amy said, "Look back, Elizabeth, and see if he's still watching." I looked back. "No," I said, "he's mowing the grass again."

"Oh." Amy sounded disappointed, and tossed her hair to show she didn't care.

Ahead of us my house looked big and lonesome, overcast by the long shadows of late afternoon. There was no one on the porch, no car in front, no sign of activity of any kind. Then, as we walked closer, through the trees I could see Mr. Hollis standing in the window of the apartment, looking down across the side yard toward the street, half hidden by the curtain. Watching. Suddenly it frightened me to see him watching like that from the top of the big empty old house. I had never noticed the house that way before; it was always just our house, and it had never looked big or empty like that to me before.

"Come in," I said to Amy impulsively.

"I can't—you heard my mother," Amy said.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow then." I was reluctant to let her go.

"Sure," she said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I went up the walk and up the porch steps. When I looked back, Amy was already out of sight down the

street. There wasn't anybody around. The street was very still. I went into the house, and I knew nobody was home. I could feel it in the house, the emptiness, the nobody-home feeling.

"Aunt Lou?"

Silence.

I went through the hall and dining room to the kitchen. Strawberries had been washed and left in a bowl on the drainboard of the sink. There was a note on the table, where we always left our notes. It said: "E.—Have gone to get some thread. You can get the table set for me."

But I didn't like the quiet, empty house, with Mr. Hollis standing behind the curtain upstairs watching the street. I started to set the table, and when I heard a car stopping in front, I went and looked out of the dining room window.

It was only the bakery man. He came up the walk, which he didn't usually do. He usually went around to the back door. But it was late in the afternoon and I suppose he was in a hurry to finish up his deliveries and quit for the day. I went to the front door.

"Say," he said, "Miss Carrington asked me for an extra loaf of cinnamon when I was here a while ago, and I didn't have one in the truck then." I opened the door and took the bread. He hurried right off again, and I watched the familiar dusty red truck until it was out of sight. The street was still again. I'd been thinking about those two men, I realized. I'd been expecting them to come around to the house, to the apartment, looking for

the Hollises. I'd been listening for their footsteps at night when I was in bed. I'd been waiting for them, without really knowing it.

But they hadn't come. And I hadn't even seen them around town anywhere all week. Maybe they had gone away, like Mr. Hollis said they would. He was still watching at his window, behind the curtain—but maybe the men were gone. Everything looked so peaceful along the street, late-afternoon sunlight streaking yards and rooftops. Surely the men were gone away by now. In our town there were only pretty girls like Amy who took dancing lessons, and boys who mowed lawns, and nice ladies like Aunt Lou who went to buy thread, and bakery trucks that would come all the way back again with an extra loaf of cinnamon. . . .

That night, as on other nights, I could hear occasional sounds from the apartment. Sometimes cupboard doors opening, sometimes water running in the bathroom or kitchen.

Some nights I heard Ruby and Barney talking in the kitchen. Sometimes they talked about how hot it was, and sometimes I couldn't hear what they said very clearly. Sometimes they talked about the men. Once Ruby said, "Even if we don't see them, I still feel like they're watching us."

And they talked about the person called Richie. Richie and the men had stolen some money—a lot of money—and then afterward Richie had double-crossed the men somehow and gone off with the money. I used

to lie in bed and feel my heart beating, holding my breath to strain to hear what Ruby and Barney were saying.

But sometimes they didn't talk at all. "The Blue Tango" played, turned low in the quiet nighttime, like music from some faraway romantic place where there were no troubles.

CHAPTER SEVEN

But the men didn't come to our house.

A sultry heat enveloped the town, and even the early morning hours lost their cool freshness. If I woke early I felt the heat already there in the room with me, like a close warm wall pressing in from the open windows.

But I always managed to go back to sleep again, and when I finally got up and went down to the kitchen for breakfast, Aunt Lou would say, "Well, I see you've come to life."

Then while I sat at the table and drank orange juice and poured milk over cornflakes, she would talk to me about all the things she'd already done that day.

"Why, I've got a load of wash on the line and some ironing done. I've got to get up and get things done before it gets any hotter. Hot enough when I do get up as it is. Phew." She would push hair back from the side of her forehead and shake her head hopelessly. You could feel summer settling down all around us like a hot electric blanket.

Despite the heat, the prospect of the Fourth of July parade in Bakersville stirred some measure of interest into the lazy routine of the days. The weekly edition of

the *Green Falls Tribune* carried a long front-page article about it, listing all the floats that would represent the various towns in the area. I ran my finger down the list and found Walker Plumbing Company, Green Falls. Old Jimmy in his bathtub.

The morning before the Fourth, Aunt Lou got up early and made a batch of cookies. They were spread out to cool all over the kitchen, and the sink was full of mixing bowls and pans to be washed. After I ate my breakfast, Aunt Lou asked me to take some of the cookies up to the Hollises. "Seeing as she liked them so much before," Aunt Lou said.

I stood by the back door while she fixed the cookies on a plate. The lilies of the valley and violets were thick in the patch by the back steps, and the roses on the trellis were in bloom. Later I would pick some for Aunt Lou, careful of the spiky green thorns that had always hurt me so when I was little.

There had been grass snakes in the flower bed once, I remembered. How frightened I had been of them. I wouldn't go into the back yard alone all that summer. And everything had been so much the same, even way back then: hot summer mornings with Aunt Lou already half through her day's work, and the *Green Falls Tribune* announcing the parade in Bakersville. Only in those days my father would take me to the parade, and Aunt Lou came along to see that he didn't let me stand out in the sun too long. She brought a folding stool to sit on and a parasol to hold over her head, and a big straw hat for me to wear. "Will I get sunstroke and die?" I had asked her.

"Never mind," she said. "Just put on the hat, please." The hat was hot and itchy, and none of the other kids I could see lined up along the street had on straw hats. But then the parade would start, and I would forget everything else.

Nowadays Aunt Lou didn't go to the parades anymore. Sometimes, if he was home, my father would drive over and watch; but I always went now with some kids from school. Somebody always had an older brother or sister who was driving, and we all crowded into the car. Before I left Aunt Lou always said, "Haven't you got something for your head, Elizabeth?"

I took the cookies up the side stairway and rapped at the screen door. Ruby came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a towel. "Well, hi, Elizabeth," she said cheerfully. "Come in."

"Aunt Lou made some more cookies," I said.

"Now wasn't that nice of her. Look at this, Barney —Miss Carrington's sent us some cookies."

Mr. Hollis was sitting at the table in the kitchen, drinking a cup of coffee. He stood up politely. "That's nice of Miss Carrington," he said. The transistor radio was on the kitchen table, tuned to a disc-jockey show.

"Come on in and have something," Ruby said to me. She put her arm through mine and drew me into the kitchen. Mr. Hollis pulled out a chair by the table for me, and sat down again himself. Ruby had been fixing eggs at the stove, and she went back and took another egg from the carton and broke it into the frying pan.

"We're just having our breakfast," she said contritely.

"I guess you think we're pretty lazy to sleep so late on a nice morning like this."

"Oh, no," I said. "I just got up myself. I always sleep late. Every morning when I get up Aunt Lou says, 'well, I see you've come to life.' "

Ruby laughed, poking at the eggs in the pan. "Well, that's what I wonder about myself sometimes when I get up and look in the mirror. I even scare myself. I think if just once I could look in that mirror and see something besides this old face, I'd—well, I'd sure be happy, that's all."

"Oh, go on," Barney said. He winked across the table at me. "You're not so bad, Ruby."

"I'm no great raving beauty," she said. "And I guess I'm at just about my lowest point of all when I first wake up in the morning. Gee, look at me now." She looked into a small mirror hung up over the kitchen sink, pushed at her hair and wrinkled up her nose.

Barney watched her fondly. "Yeah, you sure are a mess," he agreed at last. "Now if you could only cook . . ."

Ruby laughed and went back to the stove. The eggs were done and she piled them on a plate for Barney.

"Let me fix you an egg," she said to me.

"No, thanks; I really did just eat breakfast."

Barney buttered a slice of bread and began to eat the eggs. Ruby took some newspapers off the third kitchen chair and sat down at the table, laying her arms out straight along it, thin and covered with those large pale freckles, bony at the wrists. "I sure could use a mani-

cure," she said, and then she got up and went into the bathroom and came back with a bottle of nail polish.

"What's wrong with your bike, Elizabeth?" she asked as she sat down at the table again. "I don't see you riding it around much lately."

"The chain came off," I said.

"I bet Barney could fix it for you. Barney's real good at fixing things."

"Sure." Barney looked up from the eggs. "I'll have a look at it, Elizabeth."

"That would be swell."

"I like to fix things," Barney said.

"Well, gee—thanks."

Ruby smiled at Barney proudly across the table. Then she said to me, "Are you all set for the big parade tomorrow?"

"Oh, sure." I shrugged. Then, "Are you going?"

"Sure we're going," Ruby answered. "You don't think Barney'd miss a parade if it was anywheres nearby, do you?"

Barney ate his eggs and bread complacently. He reached behind him to the stove and poured another cup of coffee. He poured some in a cup for Ruby.

"Sure," Ruby went on, carefully stroking polish across her nails, "Barney's real big for parades. Just like a kid."

Barney shook his head and winked at me again. He finished the eggs and dabbed the bread around the plate to get the last of them up.

"Do they have any fireworks around here on the Fourth of July?" he asked. He pushed the plate away and tilted back in his chair.

"Not here," I said, "but in Bakersville they do. They have them in a big field outside the town, and you can see them sometimes—and hear them. When I was little my father used to take me over to see them, but now I usually stay here and go to the park dance. But we hear the fireworks."

"They have a dance here?" Ruby asked. Her head was bent down over her fingernails, and a strand of hair fell across her forehead.

"At the park. It's free. They have them every Saturday night in July, and on the Fourth of July. It's just phonograph music and a loudspeaker, but all the kids go."

"Sure, I know those dances." Ruby looked up with a bright, reminiscent expression. "We had dances just like that in the town where I used to live. My sister Pearl and I used to go. Oh, we had some good times." She chuckled to herself. "Of course my sister Pearl was the pretty one in our family; I bet she never sat out a dance in all her life.

"Only our dances were in the recreation building—that's what they called it. They had a summer program, you know, taught the kids to weave and make jewelry and do beadwork. Then on Friday nights, they'd have a dance. And on Saturday"—she squinted, trying to see clearly back through the years to that recreation building—"on Saturday the little kids used to go there to Bible school. They used that building for just about everything they could think of. They had a Ping-Pong table in one room, I remember. That was about the most popular thing, I guess."

While Ruby was talking, Barney had finished his coffee and got up. "I'll look at your bike after I shave," he said to me. Then he went into the bathroom, and we could hear the electric razor buzzing. Ruby unwrapped the cookies and slid them across the table to me. "Go on, Elizabeth, have some," she said.

"Well, maybe just one. We've got a lot left downstairs."

Ruby was humming to herself, blowing on the nail polish to get it to dry.

I had not been in the apartment since the afternoon we had had lunch together, the first time I brought up some cookies. But having listened to the Hollises moving around and talking in the apartment, I felt as if I had been there many times; it was an eerie feeling. And a guilty feeling, too. What would I do if all of a sudden Ruby looked across the table at me and cried: "You've been eavesdropping on us, you dreadful girl!"

She had taken Barney's plate and coffee cup to the sink, and stood with her back to me rinsing the dishes under running water. Her neck was thin and pale, curved as she bent her head forward a little. I got up and said, "I guess I'd better go. I have to clean my room this morning or Aunt Lou says she doesn't know what she'll do."

Ruby turned around and laughed. "I bet your room is real nice. I bet it's as pretty as a magazine picture. And I bet it isn't really very messed up. I bet you always keep it nice."

"Well now that you mention it, I don't think it's bad

at all—in fact it's really very clean," I said, pleased that she should understand. "It's just that Aunt Lou is so fussy."

"Umm . . . well." Ruby dried her hands on a towel and dropped it on the drainboard. "That's all right, too, I guess. If somebody wasn't fussy, things would get pretty messy, wouldn't they."

"I suppose so," I said, not convinced.

"Your aunt is a wonderful housekeeper. My goodness, everything just glistens and sparkles so. I could tell from the way this place was, this apartment, that she was a good housekeeper. Then when I went to pay the rent one afternoon, and saw your aunt's house, the living room, and that lovely big dining room with that big cut-glass bowl on the buffet . . . my goodness, everything just sparkled so clean and all."

She walked with me to the door. "Are you going to the dance tomorrow night with your boy friend?" she asked.

"I don't have a boy friend," I said.

"You don't have a boy friend? Go on, a pretty girl like you." She paused and then smiled wisely. "I know: there's so many boys you haven't picked any special one yet."

"It's not exactly like that," I said—although I certainly wished it were. "I just don't have any boy friend."

"There must be some boy you like," Ruby said. "I'll just bet there is. Every girl has some boy she likes."

"Oh, the boys in my class are all—oh, I don't know—so icky . . ." I said, shrugging with vague dissatisfaction.

"Too young, I bet," Ruby said.

"That's sort of it," I said.

She nodded. "I remember when I was starting high school. All the boys my age seemed like babies. It was the boys in about the senior class I really liked, and of course they wouldn't look cross-eyed at a little freshman girl."

She looked so encouraging and sympathetic I heard myself saying, "There is a boy I sort of like—he's a senior. He never even notices me, though. He doesn't even know I exist."

"Oh," said Ruby, with a long sigh, "if that doesn't sound familiar I don't know what does. When I was in high school there was a boy, Paul Frobisher, he played on the basketball team. He didn't know I existed, and I mean he *really* didn't know. But I went to every basketball game to see him play. My sister Pearl said she never knew I was so athletically inclined. I never missed a game. I was the most loyal fan. I cheered the loudest of anyone there. But he had a girl friend, a steady girl friend. I used to see them standing around her locker talking, or walking down the hall together between classes. I didn't really mind, though. I liked him just as much as ever. And I always used to pretend that someday I'd meet him when he was alone, and he'd say, 'Hey, you're the girl who comes to the games and cheers so loud.' And then he'd say he knew I was watching him and he always played extra hard to win, for me. And that other girl?" Ruby snapped her fingers airily. "He really liked me better, he'd say, but he had already started

going steady with this girl before he noticed me, and he didn't want to hurt her feelings."

Ruby paused. "Even though he never really even said hello to me, I guess I had just as much fun liking Paul Frobisher as any boy I ever liked, until I met Barney."

"Didn't he ever even say *any*thing to you?" I asked.

"Nope." Ruby shook her head and smiled to herself.

"Maybe he really did notice you, and he just didn't know how to tell you."

"Maybe he did," Ruby said. "I never thought of that." She looked at me kindly. "Maybe that boy, whoever he is, knows you exist. Maybe he's been all the time watching you and wishing *you'd* notice *him*."

"I don't think so," I said. "He's very popular. He has a lot of girl friends. And he's certainly not shy. If he ever noticed me, I guess he'd call me up and ask me for a date. He even drives girls to school in his father's car sometimes. And I've seen him driving girls around when I go uptown shopping sometimes. . . ."

I stopped. I hadn't meant to say so much. I had never even said anything to any of the girls at school. I supposed it was because Ruby wouldn't be able to guess which boy I was talking about that I felt safe confiding in her. But nevertheless I felt my face flushing with embarrassment.

"Do you think he'll be at the dance tomorrow night?" she said.

"I don't know. He might have something more important to do; he's probably got a date or something."

Ruby nodded thoughtfully. "Well, you never can

tell," she said. "He might be there, and he might even ask you to dance!"

"Oh, no—he'd never ask me to dance," I said, but Ruby only smiled and said, "You never can tell."

I opened the screen door and we stood there together a moment longer, looking down into the street and the yards and all that hot July morning. Piermont Street seemed to be sleeping under the spreading branches of the tall old elms. In the distance a bank of clouds stood motionless in the sky.

"You know, Elizabeth," Ruby said softly, "I was a lot like you when I was your age. I thought our town was awful and dull, and I wanted to go away and live in some big city somewhere. When I grew up, I told myself, that's what I'd do, go and live in some big exciting city, and I'd be rich and glamorous and do exciting things." She smiled to herself and looked down into the sleepy street. "But you know," she said, "these nice pretty little towns aren't so bad sometimes. I even kind of miss my own town now I'm away. It was a lot like this."

Ruby stayed at the top of the stairs, watching me as I went down. When I got to the bottom I looked back and she waved and called once more: "About that dance —you never can tell."

But I felt depressed by what she had said. I had always thought people who ended up living their lives without any glamour and excitement, without being beautiful and rich and living in big cities, were just people who really didn't want to. It made me uneasy to

hear Ruby saying all the things I felt. If it hadn't happened to her, maybe it wouldn't happen to me—maybe I would grow up and not be all the things I hoped.

And I wondered if it made it harder for Ruby to grow up with a long neck and bony arms and freckles, after she'd dreamed about being rich and glamorous.

I went around to the back of the house, and Aunt Lou was coming in from the yard with her clothes basket full of clothes taken down from the line.

"Well, are you still brooding about not going away for a vacation?" she said as we went in. But she didn't sound cross about it. "There's a card from Kitty-ellen came for you in the mail," she said, and nodded toward the dining room, where the daily mail was always laid on the buffet.

I went into the dining room and picked up the postcard from Kitty-ellen. "Having a swell time—wish you were here and all that. Darling boys at this place (see card.)" I turned it over, and there was a photograph of Longhill Ranch. "Well," I thought, enviously and sadly, "good for Kitty-ellen."

"Now what's the matter?" Aunt Lou said, coming on through with the clothes basket.

"Nothing," I said.

"Kitty-ellen having a good time?"

"Wonderful, she says." I turned the card back and read her hastily scribbled message again. It seemed that she had been gone a long time.

Aunt Lou went upstairs with the folded sheets, and I heard her heavy steps going across the upstairs floor. Then she came to the head of the stairs and called down:

"Elizabeth, I thought you were going to clean your room this morning."

"I am," I said. "I'm coming right now."

I thought about Ruby Hollis' basketball player as I went slowly up the stairs. I wished he had said something to her. It seemed like the least he could do, if she went to every game.

"I don't know what's the matter with you today, Elizabeth," Aunt Lou said. Then she went downstairs mumbling to herself.

But later I heard her humming, so I guess she had given up worrying about me.

And when I came downstairs again, Barney Hollis was fixing my bicycle, and Ruby was watching, sitting near the bottom of the side steps, fanning herself with a copy of the *Green Falls Tribune*. She had brought down the transistor radio and set it on the step beside her, and a thin little trickle of music fell away into the morning.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The parade was the same as ever: bands blared and fire sirens screamed; the floats went by and from some of them the riders threw wrapped hard candies and bubble gum to the children standing along the curb.

I went with Amy Banister and a few other kids, in a car driven by Jimmy Walker's brother, the one who went to Ohio State University. He parked near the street where the parade was passing, and we sat on the hood and roof of the car. Aunt Lou would have been horrified, I'm sure, to see me sitting on the roof of a car—when she didn't even like me to put my feet up on the porch railing.

All the little kids enviously stared at us sitting on a car.

But after the parade was over, we had to drive around to another street, where the floats were being judged for prizes, to get Jimmy and his little sister, who had also been on the Walker Plumbing Company float. And that took forever. We sat in the car and talked about things that had happened at school, about vacations, and about things that were going to happen at school next

year. At last Amy went over with Jimmy's brother to find him among all the people scurrying around among the parade floats.

When we got home it was nearly four o'clock, and Aunt Lou and my father were sitting on the porch waiting for me, all dressed up and ready to go to Cousin Charlotte's for the annual Fourth of July supper.

"Gracious," Aunt Lou began right off, "that must have been a long parade this year." She had on her green dress and her good pearl brooch. Her white purse lay beside her on the chair.

"We had to wait for Jimmy and his sister, to drive them back," I said. "They were on their dad's float."

"What did they ride in?" my father asked. "A bathtub?"

"No, the float was very dignified for a plumbing company," I said. "It was covered with white and red and gold crepe paper, and Jimmy was standing by a great big water faucet—I guess it must have been made out of cardboard or something, but it was painted silver, shiny like a water faucet. He was throwing candy out to the kids, and his little sister was standing under the faucet with an umbrella over her head."

Aunt Lou said, "That sounds real cute."

"I think a bathtub would be better," my father said.

Aunt Lou gave him the long-suffering look she had which meant that she might have expected as much from a man.

"Now run and get your dress on, Elizabeth," she said. "Cousin Charlotte will be wondering whatever happened to us."

I went upstairs, thinking to myself absently that if I stayed in Green Falls I would probably spend every Fourth of July in my life going to the parade in Bakersville in the afternoon, Cousin Charlotte's for supper, and the dance at the park afterward.

But I wasn't going to stay in Green Falls; and anyway, Cousin Charlotte's wasn't so bad: she always had a chocolate cake with chocolate frosting half an inch thick on top.

But the pattern of the day began to break. While I was at Cousin Charlotte's eating chocolate cake, Jimmy Walker asked Amy to go to the park dance with him that night.

Amy and I had been planning to go to the dance together, as usual. We had gone together every year since we had been in seventh grade. Kitty-ellen always went with us too, but she was away. It was the first time. Not that Kitty-ellen was going to miss much, I thought privately: the same old phonograph records, the same old kids, the same old chaperones beaming around at us. But it *was* a step above sitting around at Cousin Charlotte's listening to the men talk about the government and the women talk about recipes and babies.

I walked home from Cousin Charlotte's about eight o'clock to change my shoes and meet Amy. I always wore sandals to Cousin Charlotte's because we had supper in the yard, at a long narrow table Cousin Douglas had made himself, which was covered with a series of overlapping tablecloths weighed down by pickle jars and dishes of baked beans.

"How's your new tenant working out?" Cousin Charlotte had asked Aunt Lou while we were getting the table cleared off and ready for dessert.

"Just fine," Aunt Lou said. "They're a very nice couple. Friendly, but they keep to themselves. They like the apartment real well."

Cousin Charlotte had always been a little miffed that she didn't have an upstairs she could convert into an apartment, as my father had done. She was always saying renting was all right, if that was what you wanted to do; as though there were something not quite elegant about it.

"I saw your tenants the other day when I was driving by," Cousin Charlotte went on. "They were out in front, getting into their car. That woman isn't much to look at, is she?"

"I think she's very pretty," I said. Everybody around us looked up and stopped talking a moment, because I had spoken so suddenly and loudly.

Cousin Charlotte looked a little taken back, but only for a moment. "Well," she said, "she didn't look like much to me." She smoothed a wrinkle in one of the tablecloths and brushed some crumbs down onto the grass. Light reflected brightly on the steel rims of her glasses and the single thin band of gold on her hand. Had she ever been different, I wondered, or was she somehow just born plump and gray-haired, with a thin gold band on her finger and hands that were forever smoothing and brushing and straightening?

Aunt Lou smiled at me. "Mrs. Hollis has been very

nice to Elizabeth, took her to the movies one afternoon, and—"

"Oh." Cousin Charlotte sniffed, as though some secret suspicion were now confirmed. "Movie-crazy, I suppose."

She was always trying to make Aunt Lou dissatisfied with the people who lived in the apartment. She always found something to say about them, to show she was just as well off not having an apartment to rent as to have people like Aunt Lou rented to.

Aunt Lou pursed her lips together and sliced severely into the chocolate cake, and further talk about the Hollises was ended by the arrival of three or four of the little children, who had probably smelled the cake being cut from way out where they were playing in the front yard. They lined up, crowding each other to get closer and poking stubby fingers out to touch the frosting: all alike with their canvas play shoes and mosquito-bitten legs.

"You go along, and have a good time," Aunt Lou said when I had finished my cake and told her I guessed it was time to go home and put on my high heels. "Your father and I will be home in a little while."

I felt cross with Cousin Charlotte, and tired trying to keep my hair nice in the humid warmth of the day. The phone was ringing as I came into the house, and I hurried to the hall table by the stairs and picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

"Elizabeth . . . hi . . ." Amy hesitated.

"Hi," I said. "I just got home."

"I know—I called before and no one answered."

"Well, what's the matter?"

"Elizabeth . . . I hope you won't be mad or anything, but Jimmy asked me to go to the dance with him tonight."

"Oh."

I had never thought of anything like this happening. At last I said, "Well, sure, that's all right."

"You sure you don't mind?"

"No; don't be silly."

"Well . . ." She sounded uncertain. "Okay, then. I'll probably see you there."

"Sure," I said. "I'll see you there."

We hung up. Amy hadn't asked me whom I would go with, now that I couldn't go with her. She'd probably felt too guilty to ask that. She knew perfectly well I didn't have anyone to go with—unless I called up some of the other girls from school, but it was kind of late to start doing that. And, anyway, they might all be going with boys too.

I went upstairs and put on my pumps and combed my hair. I wiped off my lipstick and brushed my teeth, and chose a different shade of lipstick from the four My Sweetheart lipsticks I owned. They were lined up on my dressing table, four slender silver tubes. I put on my charm bracelet and went downstairs again. But when I got to the front door and looked out into the twilight, I realized I didn't want to go to the dance alone—at least not until it was pretty well started and maybe no one would notice my coming alone.

I went over and sat on the porch swing, and it creaked as I moved it back and forth.

"Hey, Elizabeth—is that you?"

The voice came around the side of the house, and I got up and looked over the side railing of the porch. At the back of the house, sitting on the steps near the top, was Ruby. She was drinking a Coke.

"Hi," I said.

"Going off to the dance now?" she asked.

"Not for a little while." I wanted to tell her how mad I was at Amy and old Jimmy Walker, but I didn't want to yell it around the side of the house.

"Come on up," she said. "I'll give you a Coke."

"Okay," I said. I went down the porch steps and around on the cobblestone walk, picking my way carefully in my new white pumps.

"My, my, don't you look gorgeous," Ruby said. "Stop right there—turn around—let me have a look at you."

I stopped at the foot of the stairway and turned around.

"You sure look gorgeous," she said again. "If that boy you like so much gets a look at you, he'll ask you to dance all right. I just bet he will. Okay, come on up."

She got up herself as I started up the stairs, and went ahead of me and held the door open for me.

The apartment was empty, but lights were on in both the kitchen and the living room.

"I like a lot of light when I'm alone," Ruby said, waving her hand around. "Makes it seem like someone's home, when all the lights are on."

"Where's—where's Barney?" I hesitated over the name. He had never asked me to call him Barney; but Mr. Hollis didn't sound right either. Ruby didn't notice.

"Oh, he's out getting some things we needed at the drugstore, some magazines and cold cream—you know, real important things like that." She laughed.

"Does he pick out your cold cream?" I asked curiously.

"There's nothing to pick out, honey," she said. "I've been using the same brand for years: Lady Esther. He's just got to ask for a jar of Lady Esther face cream." She went into the kitchen and took a bottle of Coke out of the refrigerator. Her hair was pinned up on the top and at the sides of her face, and she fumbled at the top and pulled out some of the pins, feeling the hair. "I just washed this—guess it's getting dry," she said, and left the pins in a heap on the refrigerator.

She was drinking from the bottle, but she got me a glass and poured the Coke in. "You sure look pretty," she said again.

Maybe she had been sitting long enough on the hard wooden steps, for she sank down on the living room sofa and leaned back with relief. "Well, Barney ought to be coming any minute." She looked over at the Baby Ben alarm clock.

I sat down on the chair by the couch.

"You going to the dance with one of your girl friends?" she asked.

"Well, I was. I was going with Amy Banister, but she called up a little while ago and said this boy she likes asked her to go with him, and so . . ." I shrugged and left the sentence unfinished.

Ruby watched me closely over the top of her Coke bottle.

"Oh, I don't mind going alone—much," I said hastily. "I just thought I'd wait a little while. There's no big rush."

"Sure," Ruby said, "that's a good idea. There's no rush."

"The dance lasts until midnight, anyway," I said.

"Then you've got a lot of time," she said.

I noticed that she was looking at the clock again.

She got up and took her empty bottle out to the kitchen. Then she walked around restlessly. She turned on the transistor radio and tried several stations impatiently. Even with all the lights on the apartment seemed empty, lonesome. Ruby almost seemed to have forgotten I was there. I noticed there were still rolls of Life Saver candy on one of the tables, and a copy of *Popular Mechanics* magazine. One of Barney's jackets hung over a kitchen chair, shoulders poked up high by the chair back. I could picture him standing there by that window in the kitchen the first night I had heard them talking. "It's stopped raining," he had said. I could hear his voice so clearly. . . .

"Well, now, I just wonder what's keeping him," Ruby said suddenly. She clicked off the radio and walked back through the living room to the door. She peered out into the gathering dusk. Then she said, "Why don't we walk around to the front, wait for him there, surprise him. It's stuffy up here tonight; don't you think?"

I finished the rest of my Coke and put the glass on the kitchen sink. Then we went downstairs and walked around to the front of the house.

We went to the porch, but Ruby sat down right away

on the third step and clasped her fingers around her knees.

"Don't you want to sit on the chairs?" I said.

"No, this is fine," she answered me vaguely. She was looking down the street, thinking about something.

I sat down beside her, and we made a few comments about how warm it was, and whether this year's parade was as good as usual. Then we sat silently, the empty house looming behind us and before us Piermont Street fading away into the dark shadows of nightfall. We could hear crickets in the grass. Street lamps went on at the corner, and someone across the way went in from the porch and a screen door bumped closed softly.

Then in the silence there was another sound, faint and distant.

"What's that?" Ruby asked.

I listened. "That's the music from the park. Sometimes you can hear it over here. I guess the dance has started."

"Are you going now?" she said.

"Oh, I'll go in a little while."

Then she was silent. It seemed we had sat for a long time there together on the steps.

She kept looking down the street. She stared hard at it, as if she could make Barney's car come into sight by the sheer force of her staring.

I remembered that when I had come home from Cousin Charlotte's their car had not been parked in front of the house. Barney had already left for the drugstore. How long ago that was. I had talked to Amy on the phone, and put on fresh lipstick and changed my

shoes. I had been up to the apartment and drunk a Coke. How very long he had been gone, just to the drugstore.

Soon Aunt Lou and my father would come strolling back from Cousin Charlotte's . . . but in the meantime, it had grown dark.

"Is there anything I can do?" I said to Ruby. She looked around vaguely, as though she had not been listening.

"What, honey?" she asked absently.

"Is there anything I can do?" I repeated, and she looked at me more closely, not so vaguely now.

"I mean, if you're in trouble," I said, "maybe I could help you."

CHAPTER NINE

Ruby was silent. She looked at me with a hunted expression, trying to understand what I was saying.

"What makes you think we're in trouble?" she asked at last. Her voice was very low.

"Oh—just little things I've noticed," I said cautiously. I hated to say I had listened to them talking in their apartment. It seemed cruel and unfair, when they thought they'd been all alone.

She waited for me to go on, and I said, "I mean, like those men in the drugstore."

She still didn't say anything.

"I . . ." I felt around for words, ". . . I thought they looked sort of, well, sort of strange."

"What do you mean, strange?" she said.

"Oh, you know, sort of scary."

"You haven't seen them since then, have you?" She leaned close to me. "You haven't seen them around anywhere lately?"

"No," I said. "Maybe they've gone away."

She sighed and shook her head. "I wonder."

"Why are they looking for you?" I asked. My voice was hardly more than a whisper. "Did Barney do something wrong—is that why they're looking for you?"

"Oh, no." She sounded shocked. "Barney never did anything wrong in his life. He never hurt anybody or did anything wrong in his whole life."

She paused, considering; then she said softly, "He has a brother who . . . well, who's been in trouble a lot." She paused again, trying to decide how to tell me what she wanted to say. "He just couldn't seem to get straightened out—but Barney always helped him; Richie knew he could always come to Barney and Barney would give him some money, or let him stay with us a few days. Barney just couldn't give up hoping that someday his brother would straighten out. That's the way he always put it. 'He'll straighten out, Ruby,' Barney always said to me. 'We've got to help him if we can.' "

"Did he straighten out?" I asked. I felt that the night was holding us close with tight, warm, dark arms.

Ruby didn't answer right away. She sighed, and for a moment I thought maybe she wasn't going to tell me any more. Then she said, "No, he never did straighten out. He got worse." She drew her knees up closer, and a little nervous shiver ran down her arms. But she went on. "It got so we never knew what to expect. And there was no way we could help him anymore."

The men must have come around from the back of the house, walking silently on the grass through the darkness, for suddenly they were there before us at the foot of the steps. They were so close I could have reached out and touched them, and we hadn't heard them coming.

"Hey, kid," the tall one said, "how come you're not over at the dance tonight?"

"You leave her alone," Ruby said. She put her arm

around me, drawing me close to her. "You just leave her alone."

The two men stood there silently a moment. The smaller one kept his eyes on the street most of the time, but the tall man lounged forward, putting one foot up on the steps. In the dark you couldn't tell the queer maple color of his suit.

"How've you been, Mrs. Hollis?" he said smoothly. I could see his small, close eyes, and he rubbed at them again, as though they bothered him. "You haven't all of a sudden remembered where our friend is, by any chance, have you?"

Ruby didn't say anything. I could feel her body against mine, tense and hard as a stone.

"You never were very friendly," he said, smiling wickedly. Then he looked at me, slowly, up and down, from those dreadful watery little eyes. At last, taking his time, he withdrew his foot and stood away from the steps.

"If you ever do see Richie, Mrs. Hollis, you tell him we're still looking for him—and we'll find him someday."

"We aren't planning to see him," Ruby said.

The man shrugged. "You never can tell, can you, Mrs. Hollis?"

"We don't know where he is."

The man looked at Ruby thoughtfully. "I believe you, Mrs. Hollis, I really do believe you. But it's too bad, isn't it—people who don't know anything, what good are they? Do you think they're any good to anyone, Mrs. Hollis—I mean, stop and think: What good are they?"

Then he said, very softly: "Well, good-bye, Mrs. Hollis."

Ruby gazed up at him. "Where's Barney?"

"You go down the street, Mrs. Hollis, down in the next block. I think I saw his car parked down there. Maybe he forgot where he lived. Maybe he forgot which was his house."

The men began to move away. Ruby started to get up, but the tall man held out his hand.

"No, you stay right there, Mrs. Hollis. You stay right there a little while—okay?"

They began walking backward around the side of the house. Ruby was on her feet, her hands clenched at her sides, her face frozen with fury. She stood so rigid she seemed to be trembling from the effort.

As soon as the men reached the side of the house and disappeared, she broke into a run down the front walk toward the street. I got up and ran after her. The click-click of my high-heeled pumps on the walk shattered the stillness of the yard.

We ran down Piermont Street. I couldn't catch up with Ruby because of my high heels, and because she was running so fast. I thought I heard her gasp now and then with the pain of running so fast. At the corner she didn't hesitate to see if any cars were coming, but ran right across. The streets were all deserted; from the park we could hear scraps of dance music and see a hazy patch of lightened sky above the park lights.

Ahead of me, Ruby stopped by a car parked in the darkness and struggled to wrench open the door. It stuck, and she sobbed and tugged again. The door opened, and she screamed and bent forward to look inside. As I came up beside her, she turned and

straightened up. Past her, inside the car, I could see Barney lying slumped over on his side.

"*Get someone!*" she screamed at me.

The sound of that scream and the sight of her face paralyzed me. I couldn't move or get my breath—or even think of anything to do, anyone to get, anywhere to go.

"*Get someone!*" she screamed at me again. "*Get someone!*" Then she turned back and leaned into the car again. "Barney," she was crying, tugging at the slumped figure on the seat. "Barney—*Barney!*"

And then the people started to come. A man came up first and said, "What's the trouble, lady?" And then there seemed to be a lot of people around us; they seemed to come from everywhere out of that quiet dark night, until they surrounded us—and someone must have gone for help, for at last off in the distance we heard the siren of the ambulance coming.

But Barney Hollis was already dead. The two men had paid back Richie for double-crossing them. They had killed Barney with a knife and left him there in the car. He had never even gotten to the drugstore at all.

CHAPTER TEN

Summer is almost over now. School will be starting soon.

Ruby Hollis has gone away, home to that little town where she grew up, to that town where she and her sister Pearl went to the three movie theaters. . . . Aunt Lou and my father talk about her sometimes, when they think I am away somewhere, not listening. They sit on the porch and look down Piermont Street, as they've done all their lives. Some of the trees are already beginning to turn, and the flowers blooming now are the flowers of late summer and fall, white and yellow and purple chrysanthemums, cosmos on long spindly stems.

"Someday they'll catch those men," my father always says, and Aunt Lou's voice trembles when she answers.

"To think of it," she always says.

I can see Aunt Lou shaking her head, still not able to believe.

Bees hang over the flowers in the sunlight, and green spiders with fragile legs thread themselves down from the undersides of the leaves. But one morning we will wake up and feel a chill in the air; green spiders and bees and flowers will be gone, and the first thin cold streaks of

snow will swirl across the floorboards of the old porch where the old wicker chairs stood in summer.

We have not rented the apartment yet. Aunt Lou cleaned it, as she always does, and it is silent and empty now, ready for new tenants. It is always locked, and Aunt Lou keeps the key on a cupboard shelf in our kitchen, handy in case anyone wants to look at the rooms. We will probably rent it soon; it has never been vacant long . . . it is so nice, as Aunt Lou says, for some young couple just starting out. . . .

But sometimes at night, in the silence, I can hear "The Blue Tango" playing again, and I think my heart will break. And when I wake in the morning, all the familiar things I never thought much about before seem somehow comforting now, whatever my life may someday hold: the sound of Aunt Lou's voice; my father's step on the stairs; the creak of the porch swing; the smell of coffee perking in the kitchen; sunlight coming through the green fanned-out branches of the elm trees that have lined Piermont Street since before I was born, and will go on growing taller and more beautiful there. . . .

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(continued from front flap)

which builds to a shocking climax and restates the very serious news about life that Elizabeth has been absorbing all summer—that people like her aunt and her father do not *choose* to be lonely, that there is reason to be grateful for the concealing and healing quiet of the small town, that she too may have to accept less than she has dreamed of.

CAROL BEACH YORK was born in Chicago. She attended Thornton Junior College in Harvey, Illinois, the town where she now lives. She is the author of a number of books for young people, and her short stories for adults and children have been widely published. A critic of one of her early novels wrote that she "shows rare talent . . . reaches depths of joy and sadness seldom experienced in any teen-age novel."

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